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OR, LONG PETE JENKINS'S CONVOY.

BY JOHN W. OSBON,
AUTHOR OF "THE RIVAL GIANTS OF NOWHAR,"
"CACTUS BURR, OR HARD LUCK,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TWO WOLVES FROM ELEPHANT LODGE.

"CLEANED out, pard?"

"To the last sou, hide and hoof, Oscar! May the Old Boy—"

"Nay, nay! Dave! The hurt isn't so deep as all that! Say Judge Lynch, as an amendment. The rest will follow!"

"Accepted! And may the good old judge shunt 'em off this mortal coil quick, say I. Our plans are knocked into a cocked hat!" and Dave Danton stared moodily down the rocky trail a full minute ere turning his somber black eyes upon his companion's face.

"We'll have to hoof it, pard," he continued, with a short, hard laugh. "Hoof it! Twenty miles' torture, under a broiling sun, on the worst trail in all southwestern Colorado!"

THE
THOROUGHBRED

HURLED FROM LONG PETE'S BACK, THE WILY APACHE, WITH A HORRIBLE YELL, FELL CLEAR OF THE ROCK, SHOOTING DOWNWARD WITH FRIGHTFUL VELOCITY TO DEATH FAR BELOW!

Royal Richard, the Thoroughbred.

"And all for a taste of the delights of Paradise Gulch, too!" laughed Oscar Monshall, lightly, yet with a malicious gleam in the depths of his slumberous brown orbs. "Tell ye what, pard—"

"Some other time, mate," Danton broke in, shortly. "If we're going on to the Gulch, let's be moving. A pretty plight we be in though, to lock horns with the enemy! Not so much as an ounce for the high-card!"

Again that hard desperate laugh, and thrusting his hands yet deeper into the pockets of his short velveteen coat, Dave Danton set forward with long, easy strides, his eyes aglow, his face stern and determined.

At his side walked Oscar Monshall-cool, smiling, imperturbable—in striking contrast to his fellow.

Tall, of athletic mold, with smooth, regular features, closely-cropped curling brown hair, and long, trimly-kept mustaches of deep golden-red—with brown eyes, white, even teeth, and a "milk-and-rose" complexion, Monshall was a man of splendid physique—of tiger-like beauty.

Nor was Danton a whit less symmetrical, although a good three inches shorter in stature—scarcely less handsome, though in his face the lines of dissipation were easily read. Dark were his eyes as midnight, and hair and beard vied with the raven's blackness. And if he lacked the consummate coolness and subtlety of the other, he surpassed him in physical prowess and tenacity of purpose.

Monshall was twenty-six; Danton, his senior by three or four years.

That they were sports was revealed at once by their dress, their bearing and their language.

Not the "clean, white article," but of the vampire class—fellows cunning and treacherous—polished desperadoes.

Driven from Elephant Lode by a turn of capricious Fortune—taking, in this instance, shape and form in a mandate from the marshal—they had turned toward the new and "booming" camp of Paradise Gulch, much as vultures to a carcass.

Understand, dear reader: that unassuming Oscar Monshall and Dave Danton had ridden forth from Elephant Lode's confines, superbly accoutered and with something like \$20,000 stowed snugly away in their money-belts, laughing long and loud at Marshal Kanega's posted notice.

Just at the noon hour, however, in the gloom of a narrow canyon—the wildest spot on the lonely trail—as unexpectedly as a thunderbolt from the rift of blue sky overhead, a startling change had swept over the aspect of affairs.

Forth from sheltering alcoves in the rocky walls, on either side, two men had leaped, the four forming a cordon across the narrow trail.

Their mission was apparent. The outlawed sports read it in the sable masks, in the deadly steel tubes drawn to a level, ere the stern appraisal:

"Your gold-dust or your lives!"

What could two men, however brave or reckless, have done, other than quietly yield? The quartette of road-agents held the "drop." To resist was death, quick and sure!

Yet David Danton—"Desperate Dave," they had called him in Elephant Lode—grim and determined, game to the last, had jerked a revolver from his belt—only to have it whipped from his hand by Oscar Monshall.

Compelled to dismount, the two adventurers were quickly stripped of their money-belts, valuables and weapons; after which proceeding the four road-agents departed as suddenly as they had appeared, taking with them the horses.

This thorough "cleaning up," just at that time, was about as great a disaster as could have fallen upon the two sports.

Little wonder, then, that Danton was in an ill-humor, as with that mirthless laugh he again set forward on the trail.

Then, too, the lightness with which Monshall had treated the matter, from beginning to end, nettled him not a little.

"Curse it all! can he mean it?" mused Desperate Dave, stealing a swift, side-long glance at the smiling face of his companion. "It's just like him; but—but we worked hard for the dingbats!"

"Pard, what do you think of Kanega's game?"

Carelessly enough the question came from Monshall—a suspicion of mockery in the light tones.

Dave wheeled abruptly, his hands clinched spasmodically.

"They don't herd wolves in Elephant Lode!" he replied, significantly.

"And so we were exiled?"

"Exactly."

"Dave, you don't catch my meaning—you never made a greater mistake!" he averred, with sudden earnestness, a peculiar glint in his yellow-brown eyes.

"How, pard?"

"Back there—"

"The road-agents?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Well, they were the wolves of Elephant Lode!"

Danton shrugged his shoulders.

"No doubt they were from the camp; but what of that?"

"Wait!" and a peculiarly disagreeable expression settled upon Monshall's face. "Let us go back a deal in the game."

"I am listening, mate."

"We cleaned out Richard Royale—"

"Your old pard—your very double," supplemented Danton, suddenly manifesting more than passing interest.

Monshall simply nodded, saying:

"Yes, my old pard; but of that, more anon. Suffice it now, that I plucked him in self-defense."

"You know how the trick was worked—how we led him on, day by day, scruple by scruple, until last night's crowning stroke."

"Hard, up-hill work, too, that straight-laced, square-toed, was the lad," dryly commented Danton. "It was as neat a brace as was ever dealt; but not a ducat have we left to show for it."

"No matter as to that," Monshall continued, a trifle impatiently, his glowing brown eyes sharply scanning the disconsolate face of his comrade. "With all our caution, Burke Kanega had snaked our cards and was ready from the jump to capture the dust."

"Soho! Then why didn't he corral our layout and show up the brace? Generally speaking, in such cases it's, 'Whack up, an' mum's the word.'"

"He jumped us simply because it was a part of his scheme. He wasn't working the old game; he played for the entire stake."

Danton shook his head.

"I don't see how you make that out," he exclaimed, dubiously. "Why, not even an attempt was made to recover Royale's money."

"Certainly not; but we were ordered to leave camp by sunrise this morning, and spies spotted our every move until Elephant Lode was behind us."

"Two, perhaps; but what of it?"

For a full minute Oscar stared pityingly at the fixed visage of his unscrupulous *confrere*, his own face rife with incredulity. Then, with arms akimbo, he set his handsome head slightly to one side, and uttered a laugh—a soft, melodious sound, yet tainted with a Lucifer mockery.

Danton flushed angrily.

"Easy, pard—no offense!" cut in Monshall, with a deprecatory gesture, ere the hot words surging in the brain of the other could find enunciation. "Only—it seems strange that you, usually so clear-headed, cannot see through Kanega's game."

"I cannot. What do you mean?"

"I mean that Marshal Kanega is the wolf-herd of Elephant Lode—that he and the road-agent chief were one and the same."

At these words, slowly and deliberately uttered, a marvelous change swept over Danton's face.

"Pard, you are right—I see the whole plot now," he cried, explosively. "But little good will it do now. Kanega's won!"

"Don't be too sure of that, mate," Monshall returned, significantly, an odd smile on his full, red lips. "Burke Kanega was the one played. So far as its real value is concerned, I wouldn't give him a white chip for the entire bundle of stuff he captured."

"How now? What?"

"Just this—the bills in the belt were counterfeit! The genuine article is—right here!"

And, lifting his left foot, Monshall daintily tapped his boot-heel with his right forefinger.

At that instant the sharp, ringing strokes of iron-shod hoofs on the rocky trail rung out, coming from the narrow canyon from which the two adventurers had emerged a moment before.

The expression of surprise and delight on Danton's face changed to one bordering on consternation.

"May Satan fly away with me if it isn't Royale himself!" he ejaculated, turning, as if to flee.

Monshall's hand dropped heavily upon his shoulder.

"Steady, pard," the tall sport warned, icily, his yellow-brown eyes glowing evilly. "Don't lose your nerve. Watch me—do as I do!"

"Richard Royale must not leave this trail alive!"

CHAPTER II.

"ROYAL RICHARD, OF THE RED HAND."

DESPERATE, unscrupulous wretch though he was, David Danton shuddered at the terrible words of Monshall. The pupils of his great black eyes slowly dilated, and he seemed on the point of breaking away and seeking refuge in the dense undergrowth bordering the trail.

But the lurid brown orbs of Oscar Monshall were fixed upon him with burning intensity—seeming fairly to search and sear his brain—exerting over him a strange, indefinable influence. He drew back a pace, then shook himself, as if casting off some dread incubus; his hands clinched and a sudden dash of color came into his face, a deadly glint into his eyes.

"Strike, mate, and I am with you!" he muttered, in thick, almost incoherent strains.

The arch-spirit had conquered! A smile revealed Monshall's teeth, sharp and

white—a wolfish smile, betraying the man's worst passions.

"Good enough!" he responded, in low, intense tones, as he cast a furtive glance at the swiftly-approaching horseman. "Act just as I act. Remember, pard, it is not murder—it is vengeance, retribution! Richard Royale stands between me and fortune—between me and the only woman I ever loved!"

Danton nodded shortly.

"We are wholly unarmed," he suggested.

"Mebbe!" with a faint smile, "but it is not likely we will want a weapon. Strategy, not force, must work our ends."

The two desperadoes then turned their whole attention to the horseman, who was now scarcely two hundred yards distant.

Bolt upright in the saddle he sat, yet easily and gracefully, a light sombrero pulled well down over his eyes, his arms close to his sides, his hands upon his hips, the reins lying idly across the pommel.

"It's pretty big odds we're taking in this game," Danton observed. "The cuss is a dead-shot, and his mad is up just enough for him to try a little pistol-practice on us. Don't you think so?"

But the tall sport vonchased no immediate response. A mystified look had come over his face, and he stared straight ahead at the horseman.

Noticing this, Danton looked again, whereupon his expression changed.

Evidently, something was amiss.

Nearer swept the rider, maintaining the same careless attitude; onward until within ten paces of the two desperadoes, when he abruptly drew rein, and in stern tones demanded:

"Gentlemen, do you own this trail, or are you here to gather toll?"

Monshall flushed angrily. That cold, clear voice, cutting and insolent, void of even the slightest familiar strains, jarred harshly upon him, rousing him instantly from the brief meditation into which he had fallen.

Only for the briefest measurable space of time was his annoyance manifest, however.

"The man is not Richard Royale," he reasoned; "and, as he goes toward Paradise Gulch, is it not better to meet him there as a friendly acquaintance than as a foe?"

Then aloud:

"Pardon us! We wish to detain you just a minute. May I ask if you came by way of Elephant Lode?"

"Certainly; I have nothing to conceal. I left the camp at sunrise. And you?"

"A trifle earlier."

"Gentlemen, you are the sports, Monshall and Danton?"

"Perhaps, stranger."

"You fleeced Dick Royale last night?"

"It may be so alleged."

"It is the truth! It was the talk of all Elephant Lode this morning, early as was the hour. I congratulate you—\$20,000 is not lost and won every day, even in that camp! If—"

"True or not, is it any concern of yours?" interjected Danton, his black eyes flashing viciously.

"Yes, that is what I would like to know!" Monshall supplemented, with a swift, sidelong glance at the face of his companion.

The horseman uttered a bitter little laugh.

"Quien sabe?" as the Mexicans have it!" he cried, his hazel eyes all aglow. "Richard Royale was my worst foe!"

Monshall started.

"Was—"

"He is dead—to all the world!"

The two adventurers faced each other in sheer amazement, not unmixed with relief. The words pointed to a crimson deed!

"Man, who are you?" Danton asked, in more subdued tones.

Again that wicked, reckless little laugh, and the horseman peered sharply at his surroundings ere replying.

"You have heard of Bill Brazzleton?" he queried.

"The Arizona road agent?"

"The same."

"Who in the West has not?"

"Well, he was my twin brother—I am Dick Brazzleton, better known as Royal Richard, of the Red Hand! To fleece the pilgrims Bill took to the road; I attain the same end in a more genteel manner."

"I see," muttered Danton. "You are of our cloth—a card-sharp!"

"Exactly! And—"

"But this Royale matter," Monshall interjected. "Do you know, at first sight we jumped to the conclusion that you were Royale himself?"

Leaning back in his saddle, Brazzleton uttered a peculiar chuckling sound—a sound not pleasant to hear. There were hard lines about his mouth, hidden by his drooping mustache—a lurid gleam in his hazel eyes, vailed by the half-closed lids.

"A case of mistaken identity, I reckon!" he observed, as he righted himself. "Such things will happen."

"Oh, yes," returned Monshall, dryly. "We discovered our mistake, though, before any se-

rious harm was done. And you say Royale is dead?"

"He is dead—to all the world."

"It seems hardly credible! How did it happen?"

Brazzleton shrugged his shoulders.

"If dead men tell no tales, why should the living?" he cried, significantly. "But, time is wasting, gentlemen, and even now I am due at Paradise Gulch. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing, mate. We wished simply to get an idea of the state of affairs at Elephant Lode," declared Monshall. "We'll meet you later at the Gulch."

"Hope so—we might be able to form a combine. So-long," and touching spurs to his splendid bay, Dick Brazzleton rode rapidly down the trail.

The two wolves from Elephant Lode gazed after him long and earnestly.

"Oscar!"

"Well, Dave?"

"There's something rotten in Denmark!"

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it! I knew Bill Brazzleton in Tucson, before he took to the road. To the best of my belief, he never had a twin brother!"

"I don't know, I'm sure, Dave. There may be a movement of some sort afoot against us. Royale may be alive—in which event that fellow may be one of his spies."

"Or the original Richard, himself!"

"Hardly that, Danton. I've known the fellow, off and on, from boyhood. We both came from the same neck o' the woods. I don't think he could disguise himself to deceive me."

"Then, too, I've heard of Royal Richard, o' the Red Hand—a Northwestern Thoroughbred, and this Brazzleton answers to his description, to the letter. But, whoever the galoot may be, it certainly behooves us to 'ware the hawks. As soon as we arrive at the Gulch, we will pay our respects to Brazzleton."

"And that reminds me that we had better be edging along," observed Danton.

But, the detaining hand of Monshall again fell upon his shoulders.

"Wait, Dave! First let me map out our campaign!" she schemer exclaimed, "that is, if you are willing to follow where I lead."

"Fool if I wouldn't!" ejaculated Danton, almost fiercely. "Reckon I know the color of pay-dirt when I see it. Go on, pard; you've showed yourself the clean, white thing, so far."

The tall sport's lips parted just enough to show his glistening teeth. The smile—if smile it could be called—was anything but pleasant.

"It's a level head you have, mate!" he averred, his dusky eyes half-hidden by their drooping lids as he peered searchingly into the face of his ally. "And I believe I can trust you as far as I could any man living."

"Try me, and see!" returned Danton swiftly, his lowering features suddenly lighting up. "Put it there, pard. Didn't you lift me from the flat of my back? Sure! Reckon I won't forget it soon, black sheep though I be."

"Mind you, now, I'm not calling for even a sight at the hand you're putting up in this gilt-edged scheme you hint at—I'm going it blind, with never a word! Only— Well, you're the chief, and—"

"And I'll deal the cards right into your hand!" cut in the tall sport, as his ally hesitated. "Come—it is time you knew the game. Mad though it is, yet a king might well renounce crown and scepter to enter the lists, for the stake is a princely one—a mine as rich as any in all New Mexico, and with it the heart and hand of Pauline Mordaunt, a woman as pure and beautiful as any the sun shines upon this day."

CHAPTER III.

CRITICAL MOMENT.

DAVID DANTON quivered like one electrified, his dark eyes aglow with suppressed excitement. Greed, wild and eager, shone forth from every feature.

Monshall watched his co-agent narrowly. He had not misjudged his man. Whatever the task, Desperate Dave would be the tool, if well paid.

But not upon gold alone had Monshall depended to gain the faithful service of the scoundrel. Danton must be made to acknowledge the tall sport's mental superiority—to fear, and yet to trust him thoroughly; and, above all, to feel that their interests were indissoluble.

And now the arch-plotter believed that end had been attained—that the time to unbosom himself had come.

He turned from the trail, accompanied by Danton, the two laying their course toward the brink of a precipice a short distance away.

"I don't think we shall be overheard here," observed Monshall, with a glance at his surroundings, as he halted in the shade of a giant boulder; "but in a gold district one cannot be too careful, you know."

"Yes; the first tree or rock may conceal a prospector, a hunter or a trapper," readily assented Danton, seeking a seat in the narrow shadow. "But we'll be safe enough here, on the cool side of this boulder. With it at our back and the precipice on our left, we can

guard against anything of the kind from the two open points."

The tall sport nodded his approval of the position taken.

"Now, we'll get down to the milk in the cocoanut—to the details of the scheme—just as quickly as possible," he exclaimed, as he nervously nipped the end from a cigar.

"I am from Fort Wayne, Indiana, originally, and I suppose it goes without saying that the name in my baptismal rite wasn't Oscar Mon-

"At any rate, this Royale and myself are first cousins, and just of an age. We were chums together at school, and our intimacy lasted until we reached that point at which the road forks. There I turned to the left—it was all down-grade, you know—and went to the dogs. He held to the right.

"And just at that point it was, too, that our rivalry began. Pauline Mordaunt was by odds the most adorable creature in the overgrown town, and she was the rock upon which we split. Royale and myself were just twenty-one, and as like as the traditional two peas; but his people were pretty well heeled, financially, as were Pauline's, while your humble servant was anything but a Croesus; so—Royale got the girl.

"How it was brought about doesn't matter, just here, but within six months from the time I was thrown overboard, the firm of Royale & Mordaunt went to the wall with a crash, beggaring the two families.

"So the marriage didn't take place—hasn't yet, though a good five years have elapsed.

"You know how the trick was worked back there at Elephant Lode—how completely Royale was deceived. He—"

"Sure! And you played the gospel-sharp act as fine as silk, too!" broke in Danton, enthusiastically. "What, with that bit of acting and the little touch of the drug, could the keenest of bloodhounds have done? And, between us, he isn't shrewder than Vidocq!"

"And yet, too shrewd to live!" averred Monshall. "But for the interference of Kanega, he would have cashed in for all time, then and there!

"But, to get back to the subject in hand; the time and place for the marriage of Royale and Pauline have at last been definitely appointed. By the merest chance, a letter from the girl to Royale has fallen into my hands, and a most important document it proves to be. And the beauty of the situation is, that Royale himself is yet ignorant of its contents.

"Here it is," and Monshall drew from an inner pocket in his coat the missive.

The heavy white envelope bore, in a round, graceful hand, the address:

MR. RICHARD ROYALE,

Saguache,
Colo."

Danton leaned forward, glaring hungrily at the purloined letter.

"As you see, it was forwarded from Saguache to Elephant Lode," continued Monshall, drawing the neatly-folded sheets from the envelope. "It was the first intimation of the exact whereabouts of Royale I had received in three years. Indeed, I had supposed that he and Pauline were married long ago, and had given up all hope in that direction.

"It was a lucky find, and a curious one, too. If you remember, I picked up the letter at the outskirts of the camp the evening we arrived there."

"Two weeks ago to-day," supplemented Danton, with interest unabated.

"Yes; it was then we formed our little scheme to relieve him of his money—with the primary object, on my part, of getting him out of the way. The task wasn't such a one as I had anticipated, thanks to the difference between a western detective and a tenderfoot."

"But we got there just the same!" and Desperate Dave gave a low laugh. "The scheme was too artistic to fail."

"Yes, and the thing was well managed," added the tall sport, complacently. "But, listen, for you will find it necessary to familiarize yourself with a portion of this letter."

And selecting a sheet, Danton read as follows:

EASTERN SLOPE OF THE MIMBRES, N. M.,
March 2, 188—

MY DEAR PAULINE AND ROGER:

At last I have the best of news to impart. You may come at once, or as soon as you can close up your affairs in Fort Wayne; for my labors have been crowned with a munificent reward. Here in the Mimbres Mountains, in company with two faithful friends, I have reached, by sheer accident, the Mecca of my hopes and dreams for five years past—a genuine pay-streak—a mine of almost fabulous value!

"Exigencies have arisen, however, that compel, for the present, not only my closest personal attention, but also absolute secrecy as to the location of the mine of yellow treasure.

"At San Marcial you will be met by Long Pete Jenkins and Big Dale Keith, whom no truer or more steadfast friends exist. They are diamonds in the rough. Follow their advice and instructions to the letter. You will be piloted to Dead-Tree Knob, at which point I hope to meet you in person.

"If it could be so arranged, it would be well, per-

haps, to have Dick Royale join your party—say at Alamosa, or even at Palomas. I feel the need of a lieutenant—of a man not only to be trusted thoroughly, but one who is also expertly familiar with the amenities of this peculiar section. That Royale is both, I well know."

Monshall paused a moment, then folded the sheet, saying:

"That is all relating directly to the mine. Pauline's letter to Royale, in which this was enclosed, states that she will reach Alamosa on or about the fifteenth of June. Their marriage is to take place three weeks later.

"My plan is this: From Paradise Gulch you will proceed direct to Palomas, and, in whatever guise you may choose to assume, intercept and join the train.

"I will follow a few days later. When I join the party, you are to greet me as Dick Royale, an old and near friend!"

"You intend to step into Royale's shoes!" exclaimed Danton.

"Exactly! An easy matter, I believe, as I bear a remarkable resemblance to the Simon Pure article. Then, too, the lovers have not seen each other for well onto five years—another big point in my favor."

Danton drew a long breath.

"It is a big thing, and the scheme ought to work!" he muttered. "It is simple enough. But what if the bad penny should turn up?"

"Royale? I shall see that we experience no difficulty from him!" answered Monshall, viciously. "He—"

Danton's hand dropped warningly upon his shoulder.

A shadow had fallen upon the rocks before them—the head and shoulders of a man, projected from a person above and behind them upon the massive boulder!

"Ware hawks!" hissed Danton, savagely.

The tall sport wheeled, throwing out his right arm. His hand closed around the butt of a small revolver.

Then his eyes fell upon the intruder, and he reeled back against Danton, aghast—faint with rage and chagrin!

Had his precious plot been overheard, or was Fortune playing into his hand?

The man upon the rock was Richard Royale!

"You miserable sneak-thief! I'll take that letter," sternly exclaimed the young western detective, his dark eyes blazing with honest indignation. "Up with your hands—both of you—or I'll cut loose your souls, if souls you have!"

CHAPTER IV.

ROYAL RICHARD SHOWS HIS HAND.

FOR a single instant, the entrapped plotters stood as if spellbound, then, reluctantly enough, Danton obeyed the imperious command. The steel tube frowning him in the face had an awesome effect not easily overcome.

Not so with Monshall, however. He made a feint at complying, with the determination to chance all on a snap-shot at his foe.

"Drop that!"

Warned by the basilisk gleam of the tall sport's eyes, Royale had, at the last breath, divined his intentions.

The two reports rung out together.

A fierce "curse you!" slipped from between Monshall's suddenly clinched teeth—to change instantly to an exultant cry, for, throwing up his hands, Richard Royale swung half around, then toppled backward from the rocks!

A deathly pallor overspread Monshall's face. He trembled so that he could hardly retain his hold on his revolver.

What a flood of conflicting thoughts and emotions overwhelmed him at that moment!

Was Royale dead?

Was the obstacle in the way of the scheme for a fortune removed?

If so, at what a cost!

"He's done for, fast enough!" gritted Danton. "The little Joker, mate, till I see that the master's ended right."

Monshall silently yielded the weapon.

Assuring himself that the remaining chambers were loaded, Danton glided around the boulder.

When he reappeared, his face was set and forbidding. He displayed an extra revolver.

"Over the cliff, I reckon!" he announced, with a short, jerky nod. "It cuts in behind the boulder. The gun lay on the edge of the face."

"Did you see—"

"No; it's three hundred feet to the rocks below, if it's an inch, and the foot of the cliff is shrouded in gloom."

The tall sport shuddered.

"Let's get away from here," he muttered, huskily. "I'm badly shaken up. It was all so sudden. And my arm begins to pain me."

"You're hit?"

"Just a scratch—a hole through the fleshy part of my left forearm."

Danton was instantly all attention. Under his deft fingers the wound was quickly dressed and the injured member placed in an improvised sling.

Then once again the two adventurers turned their faces toward Paradise Gulch.

"Ah! here you are! Welcome, gentlemen, to Paradise Gulch, the liveliest, hottest little gold-camp in the length and breadth of Colorado! And I bespeak for you prosperity unbounded! The seed has been sown, the grain has grown and ripened. The bounteous harvest goes a-begging for the sickle of the thoroughbred! Dear boys! I can't express my delight at seeing you! I can't—I really *can't!*"

And Royal Richard, pushing forward a pace, impetuously clasped a reluctant hand in each of his own strong palms.

The two adventurers were nonplussed.

Was that strange, fiery glow in the dark eyes of the sport one of menace?—the smile upon his lips one of deep-rooted hatred? Or, did the garish light give the lie to his real expression?

Certain it was that his grasp was cordial—all too cordial for comfort.

'But, was he one of Richard Royale's spies?

Monshall and Danton felt that they were upon uncertain ground—that at any moment a yawning abyss might open at their feet.

None but a preternatural eye could have read the impress of these disquieting doubts upon their faces, however. Outwardly the two adventurers were cool and collected.

Monshall essayed a response to the half-mocking strains.

"Hello, Braz—"

"Royal Richard—here, there and everywhere—if you please!" interrupted he of the Red Hand, with an airy bow, as he released their hands and led the way toward the bar.

"I stand corrected," assented Monshall, in a low tone. "Believe me, we are more than glad to see you! In fact, we had decided to look you up the first thing in the morning."

"That we had!" chimed in Danton.

"You overwhelm me, gents—you do, indeed!" with a covert sneer. "But, come! You're just off the trail! Have a little something to trim up your internal economy! I can re—"

"Hello! what's the matter with the arm? Run afoul of a snag?"

This last to Monshall, with every evidence of surprise.

The tall sport looked annoyed.

"An old wound, reopened by over-exertion," he ventured. "A little painful—nothing worse."

"An old wound, eh? Look to it, old man—dangerous this weather. I'd an idea that mebbe you'd run—wait, though! Have you heard the latest news from Elephant Lode?"

The voice of the Red-Hand Sport sunk to a whisper as he uttered the question, and his darkly glowing orbs seemed to pierce Monshall through and through.

"Why ask?"

It was Danton's voice—low, sullen, not unlike the ominous growl of a crouching brute.

The presence of the sport seemed to have upon him much the effect of a red rag upon a mad-dened bull.

Royal Richard quietly ignored the question.

"Nothing since you passed us on the trail today," Monshall averred. "Anything startling?"

"Our mutual friend—"

"Royale?"

"Yes—alive and kicking, and on your trail, hot foot!"

"The devil!"

"Or one of his agents!" with a mocking little laugh. "I thought I'd warn you!"

"A mighty interest you take in our affairs!" exclaimed Danton, savagely. "Go tell your master we are here—if you're less a coward than he!"

Royal Richard started sharply.

"My master!" he exclaimed.

"Your master—Royale!"

The next instant Danton regretted the words. A clinched hand caught him squarely between the eyes, flooring him in a twinkling!

In the same breath, the Red-Hand Sport, recoiling a pace, drew his self-cocking revolvers.

In this movement, he barely discounted Monshall, who, though wounded, was prompt to assist his discomfited ally.

"I hold the drop, you'll notice, gentlemen!" observed Royal Richard, in a matter-of-fact tone. "And now that you've danced, you must pay for the music!"

A terrible look crossed the face of the Red-Hand Sport as he uttered the words—a look hard and cold, fraught with deadly determination!

The inmates of the rough gambling-hell parted right and left, eager to see the outcome of the strange quarrel, yet anxious to keep out of reach of stray bullets.

Monshall uttered a sardonic laugh.

"You've played your game well, you treacherous hound!" he cried, his voice quivering with suppressed passion; "but, what the object you expect to gain may be, is more than I can see. If it be simply cheap notoriety—"

"Cut it short, dear boy!" interrupted Royal Richard, almost savagely. "I can tell you in just one word: *Vengeance!*"

"Vengeance?"

"Just so! For the why and wherefore, read

between the lines of my proclamation. It is upon the wall, just behind you!"

The two adventurers turned.

The following, written in a bold, legible hand, on a sheet of white paper, tacked to the rough boards, stared them in the face:

NOTICE!

To whom it may concern:—

"I hereby publicly post Oscar Monshall (*alias Rev. Reuben Harpy*) and David Danton—"Desperate Dave"—as cheats and swindlers; and more, as

COWARDLY THIEVES AND MURDERERS!

Evidence to substantiate these charges can be had of the undersigned.

"Said Monshall and Danton, upon seeing this, can come to the scratch, or leave the camp at once and forever!"

[Signed.]

"ROYAL RICHARD, OF THE RED HAND."

The varying expressions that flitted across the faces of the two desperadoes, as they read line after line of the peculiar instrument, were simply indescribable.

A true bill! and, bitter as was the draught, they must turn their backs to Paradise Gulch!

As these thoughts flashed through Monshall's brain, he wheeled and faced the Red-Hand Sport.

"We accept your challenge!" he cried, his face bloodless as marble, his eyes burning luridly, as he lifted his uninjured arm. "We accept it in the spirit in which it is given! It is bitter, black work you have done us—work that nothing but your blood or ours can undo!"

"Give us time to eat and drink. Let midnight be the hour, the main street of the camp the place, revolvers the weapons, ten paces the distance, first one and then the other."

"Agreed!" Royal Richard exclaimed, bowing, as he shoved his revolvers back into his belt. "You first, your pard next."

The moon, full and round, hung high in the heavens, rendering the streets of the camp as light almost as day.

The hour was midnight.

Ranged along each side of the principal street could be seen the entire male population of the Gulch, forgetful of Morpheus and their couches, intent on witnessing the impending triangular duel.

Of Monshall and Danton, nothing was to be seen. Yet there was scarcely a man present but had faith in the ultimate appearance of the two sports.

Their bearing during the controversy with Royal Richard in the Shades of Fortune, immediately following their arrival in camp, had been such as to impress the majority of the "Angels" of the Gulch most favorably.

Prominent among the minority was Marshal Brule, a grizzled veteran of the gold-fields.

From the first he had expressed the opinion:

"Fight? Five ter one they stampede, fer they be two-legged kiotes, ef ever I see'd sech critters!"

The marshal was almost alone in his views.

He stood, with the Red-Hand Sport, in the doorway of the Cobb House, as the shanty doing service as a hotel was known.

Brief as had been their acquaintance, a high degree of confidence seemed to exist between the two men.

"Your chicks have flown ther pit!" Brule declared, after a searching glance up and down the street. "Time was up a good half-hour ago!"

"Twenty ter one they hes shook ther dust o' ther Gulch from theyr feet!"

"It begins to look that way," admitted the Thoroughbred, smiling grimly. "It is little less than I expected! In fact, it is precisely what I expected!"

The marshal looked puzzled.

"You'd an object, then—"

"I had, most assuredly! I suspected them of the murder of my pard!"

"They'd better 'a' come ter ther scratch!"

"They had, for now my suspicions are verified," and a hard, cold expression crept into the face of the Red-Hand Sport—a dangerous glow into his eyes.

"Let them go!" he continued, to himself, rather than to Brule; "let them go! Whether the trail leads over mountain or mesa, through fire or water, sooner or later my murdered pard shall be avenged!"

A silent handclasp, and the Thoroughbred turned and strode rapidly down the street.

Marshal Brule gazed after him long and earnestly.

"A thoroughbred, an' with nerve ter spare!" he muttered. "They're two ter one, but I w'u'dn't stand in theyr shoes fer all the gold in Colorado! He's too quiet, too cool, too much o' a human sleuthhound, ter fail! They be doomed men!"

CHAPTER V.

LONG PETE JENKINS.

"EASY, thar, Miss Pauline! No more sech swingin' an' dashin' about, *please!* Et'd be resky, jest now, even fer sech a tough ole sinner es me! An' you—wal, miss, ye can't un'er-

stan'—an' I s'pose ye w'u'dn't ef ye c'u'd, ef ye be made up like ther rest ov ther calico tribe!"

Pauline Mordaunt drew rein abruptly, throwing a glance, half-earnest, half-amused, over her shoulder at the face of the guide.

"No, Mr. Jenkins, I do not understand," she averred, quickly. "Will you explain the nature of the danger your words seem to imply?"

Long Pete Jenkins nodded, with indescribable gravity.

"Injuns—'Paches!" he replied, halting.

"Indians—where?"

"Hyar, thar, everywhar—mebbe," with a circular sweep of his long and sinewy arm. "We be in 'Pache kentry, now, Miss Pauline!"

The girl cast a swift, apprehensive glance over the wide expanse of plain to the north and south, then forward across the rolling stretch to the dim eastern foot-hill of the Mimbres. A grassy sea, under a summer sun, quiet, undisturbed, unbroken by even a sign of human presence.

Then, wheeling her horse, she gazed backward over the trail, her clear gray eyes dwelling anxiously on the wagon-train three hundred yards to the rear.

Simply couched though it had been, the declaration of Long Pete Jenkins was fraught with significance that would have brought a sudden chill to a heart infinitely stouter than that of fair Pauline Mordaunt.

But, for a fleeting moment only did the girl exhibit traces of alarm. The afternoon was bright, smiling, exhilarating—surcharged with the very elixir of buoyancy, and callous must be the nature to resist its subtle influences. The cloud vanished from Pauline's face; trouble in store there might be, but direful foreboding would not lessen its weight.

Long Pete noted the change with a breath of relief.

"She's cl'ar grit!" he mused. "Lucky, too, fer thar's mischief-makin', sure's two an' two count four!"

"Mr. Jenkins, have you actually seen Indians?"

Very quiet and matter-of-fact was the clear young voice.

"Nary red—as yit," slowly asseverated Long Pete, looking down into the sweet, upturned face with a grave smile. "But I has seen what is w'u'ss, jest now—Injun sign! Thar was plenty ov it in ther tall grass all around our camp this mornin'. Red scouts had theyr eyes on us last night."

"But why worse?"

"Beka'se it tells me thet we aire in danger ov ambush. Ther spies belong ter a large party. They hev bin sent out at night ter larn our strength. Ther 'Pache aire a treacherous, cunnin' critter—ther w'u'st ov ther hull red race. They'll try ter wipe us out, not openly, but without warnin'."

"I'd hoped ter pull acrost this hyer neck ov their stampin'-ground, an' reach Dead-Tree Knob an' yer father, 'thout runnin' afoul ov ther red imps. But that is out ov ther question, now; they hev sighted us, an' we must look sharp ter escape theyr traps."

"So, Miss Pauline, slow an' careful must be ther words."

The girl nodded, as if she thoroughly understood that part of the matter.

"Have you spoken to Uncle Roger of your discovery?" she asked.

"Ya-as; but ter him only. Es fer Jose an' Pedro, we decided that the exact state of affairs hed best be kept from them till ther last, as also from ther three darkies."

Pauline vouchsafed no remark, but soon turned and with a parting word rode slowly back to the train.

"God bless her sweet face!" uttered Long Pete Jenkins, reverently, as he turned in his saddle to gaze wistfully after the lissom figure. "Thar's trouble in store fer that gal—trouble what'll take sharp, hard fightin' ter overcome. I kin feel it deep down in ther marrow ov my ole bones!"

"Oh, fur Big Dave an' ther bonny sport, Dick Royale! With theyr stout arms an' true hearts we c'u'd build a wall about my partner's darter—a wall ter defy ther red pests."

"But thar! she's reached ther train!" he muttered.

"Now fer a long scout ahead, fer ther hellionated red-skins means mischief. Ther odds aire, we'll find ther top ov Dead-Tree Knob a hornets' nest ov painted devils!"

And wheeling his horse, the old plainsman rode rapidly toward the distant Mimbres, heading a trifle south of west.

An odd figure, truly—one worthy of more than a passing glance.

Nearly, if not quite, six feet eight inches in height, slender yet well formed, with sinews as tough and elastic almost as spring-steel, without an ounce of spare flesh, the borderman possessed Herculean strength, with agility simply marvelous.

If his face, round, and boyish in expression, was as dark as an Indian's from long exposure, and as smooth as a woman's. Sound white teeth and twinkling blue eyes abridged in a measure its decided lack of "beauty."

His clothing was of buckskin, with high-

topped boots and wide sombrero. A Winchester lay across the pommel, while a brace of heavy revolvers and a bowie-knife hung in his broad leathern girdle.

A thin fringe of long gray hair flaunted over his shoulders—a mere wisp whipping in the passing breeze. Beneath the sombrero was a scalpel-skull!

An Indian-hater?

No; but a terror to outlaws and renegades—to bad white men generally. Why not? Had not he suffered at their hands?

Where was his home?—his wife?—his child?

The first, ruthlessly blotted out; the others, the endearing elements of the first, buried with his hopes, thirty years ago.

Fifty-five, and a prairie vagabond—a tramp, here to-day, there to-morrow!

Not a sot—a drunkard; he and liquor were not even passing acquaintances.

A man, honest, brave and loyal—a stanch friend, and an open foe; a dead-shot, a splendid horseman; a generous companion, often whimsical, sometimes silent and reserved, but never morose.

Such, in brief, was Long Pete Jenkins.

As the clean-limbed bay swept forward at a sharp gallop, the eyes of the old plainsman were not idle. Too much was at stake—too much depended upon the full exercise of his skill and prowess—to permit of even a semblance of carelessness: too well he knew the significance of the signs he had seen—too well the dread possibilities of the coming night.

For two days past, the little train had been creeping deeper and deeper into a section overrun with marauding Apaches. Every precaution had been taken by the faithful guide, even to long detours to avoid the beaten trails of the Red Riders. But, that his party had at last been discovered—that the meshes of a fatal net were being slowly drawn about it—Long Pete had ample evidence.

Could Dead-Tree Knob be reached in safety, the position thus taken could be held until the arrival of Jackson Mordaunt, and Richard Royale and Big Dale. Thence, with such accessories, the journey might be completed.

But the guide had little hope in this direction.

His experience with the Apaches had taught him to look for the worst.

And that?

The secret seizure of Dead-Tree Knob by the red-skins!

They were familiar with the topography of the country, and, knowing the many natural advantages of the Knob as a camp, had probably divined that the party intended so to utilize it.

So Long Pete had shrewdly reasoned, and it was to put his theories to the test that he had left the train.

Dead-Tree Knob was not far distant. Indeed, the keen eyes of the plainsman could descry its scraggy crest, miles to the westward, slightly in advance of the lines of the foot-hills and perhaps five miles to the north of the point toward which he was riding.

His course turned more and more to the southward, there again veered to the west, until at last the crest of the Knob was hidden behind a swell in the plain.

Five minutes later he was riding briskly up the dry channel of the stream, heading toward a gap in the foot-hills.

Onward he rode—the dead channel gradually assuming a rougher character, straggling bushes and dwarfed trees taking the places of high, matted grass on the margins of the overhanging banks—onward, until the sunlight faded into gloom, until the dark shadows of the foot-hills overhung his rough trail.

A strange hush held sway over all, unbroken save by the hoof-strokes of Long Pete's iron-shod steed. What that silence portended the scout well knew.

Red-skins were in the hills—red-skins bent on mischief!

Turning into a branch of the channel, Long Pete headed directly north. Half an hour of sharp, hard riding brought him to a small plateau, whence the crest and three sides of Dead-Tree Knob were plainly visible.

Dismounting, he secured his horse in the depths of a small thicket, then sought a sheltered position in a clump of bushes at the outer edge of the plateau.

"All serene over thar, so far as the naked eye kin see," he muttered, after a cursory glance, as he produced a field-glass. "But we'll see how things look thro' this leetle joker."

He proceeded to bestow upon the crest and sides of Dead-Tree Knob a most rigid scrutiny.

Apparently, all was pre-eminently satisfactory, for when he lowered the glass his face shone with relief unspeakable.

Next, he made an earnest survey of the adjacent hill, and of the plain sloping eastward from the foot of the Knob.

And yet no sign of a red-skin.

Far off across the grassy slope the wagon-train was discernible; and as the eyes of the old scout dwelt upon it an expression of disquietude crept into his face.

A mile beyond it, approaching at a swift pace, was a lone horseman.

Long and earnestly through his really fine

glass Long Pete studied the mounted stranger, only to lower the telescope and shake his head in a dissatisfied way.

"Don't like it—cain't make 'im out!" he mused. "It ain't Big Dave—that's sart'in! nor Jackson Mordaunt! Mebbe it's Dick Royale, but ther odds aire ag'in' it."

Again that slow, dissatisfied shake of his head, and then he continued:

"I'll take one more look all 'round, then push across an' git a closer peep at Dead-Tree afore I set back ter jine ther wagons."

Once more the glass came into play against the brown face of the Knob, with a result slightly different from the first attained.

Naught indicative of living presence was to be seen upon the barren, sharply-sloping sides of this outpost of the foot-hills, nor upon the grassy level gracing the center of its circular crest.

But among the dead trees and the great boulders bordering the summit, hidden so adroitly that only the closest scrutiny could reveal their presence, were not less than a half-score Apaches!

The flashing of a knife-blade in the sun's rays, catching the quick eyes of the old scout, had led to their detection!

"Father ov Adam! ther trap is set!" Long Pete ejaculated, gulping down a great lump in his throat. "How kin we sarcumvent ther devils? That is only one mesh ov theyr net!"

Having found that the facts sustained his theory, Pete's first idea was to seek a loop-hole of escape. He studiously examined the Knob, then again turned his glass upon the surrounding hills.

Nothing new was developed.

All he could do, just then, was to retrace his steps.

Accordingly, with a hasty look at the distant train, he put up the telescope, preparatory to leaving the plateau.

Just at that instant, impelled by a sense of peril, he cast a swift glance over his shoulder. It was well for him—well for Pauline Mordaunt and her friends—that he heeded the premonition!

What a spectacle presented itself to his startled eye!

Within a dozen paces, creeping forward with cat-like stealth, their snakish orbs aglow with a devilish light, their weapons drawn and ready for instant use, were three brawny Apache braves!

CHAPTER VI.

DOWN TO DEATH.

IT WAS A CRITICAL MOMENT!

Three against one, and that one taken by surprise!

Long Pete instantly realized the depths of the strait into which he had fallen.

Unless the three braves were speedily and effectually silenced, his reconnaissance would prove far more detrimental to the Mordaunt party than it otherwise could have proved beneficial.

The main body of the Apaches, lying in ambush upon the crest of Dead-Tree Knob, would unavoidably be apprised of the fact that their plot was in a fair way to miscarry, and would doubtless adopt other and more decisive measures.

This thought surged rapidly through the brain of the scout, nerving him to a course he otherwise would have tried to avoid.

The three red-skins must die!

It was absolutely necessary to the safety of those near and dear to the plainsman.

Not so much as a thought of self—of the great odds against his escaping injury or death—entered the head of Long Pete Jenkins.

His gleaming blue eyes ran rapidly over the three savages. Tall, brawny fellows they were, each armed with bow and arrows, knife and hatchet, and tricked out in the full Apache paraphernalia.

Their purpose was easily understood. It was obvious to the plainsman that they were scouts. Having discovered his presence in the hills, they had trailed him to the plateau.

Truly, the odds were desperate!

Yet, there remained to Long Pete one advantage—an advantage he was not slow to note:

The three braves had as yet failed to locate his exact position in the clump of bushes, so dense was the foliage.

In fact, they even were not certain their intended victim would be found on the plateau.

The manner of their approach apprised the scout of this latter fact. While stealth characterized their every movement, yet they advanced in a body. Had their quarry been located, they would have separated and crept forward from three sides.

Onward they came with eager, sinister faces, their darkly-glittering orbs searching every foot of ground; onward, till they stood peering forward at the edge of the bushy growth, the scalp-locks in their girdles pressing against the dark-green leaves.

The decisive moment had come.

Not another breath could Long Pete escape the Argus eyes of the bloodthirsty trio.

A sharply-drawn breath, a mighty effort, and

with a magnificent, panther-like leap, the giant scout hurled himself upward and forward, planting his heels full against the chest of the central brave with such force as to dash him senseless to the earth!

A guttural ejaculation of surprise and chagrin greeted this almost superhuman feat.

The next instant, before either of the astounded braves could do aught to prevent it, a long knife flashed wickedly in the sunlight, sinking hilt-deep into the throat of the second of the Apaches!

A yell of rage and consternation arose to the lips of the last of the ill-starred trio, to be shut off in its incipiency by the grasp of an iron hand upon the swelling throat of the brave.

Tall, athletic, of powerful build, and imbued with the strength and fury of desperation, he battled gamely for life, grappling with his redoubtable adversary in a savage hand-to-hand struggle.

So closely interlocked were the two combatants that neither could use the knife he held.

As suddenly as unexpectedly, however, fortune, rather than superior prowess, decided the contest in favor of the white scout. In swaying to and fro, back and forth, the red-skin lost his footing through a misstep and fell backward in a heap, not only losing his hold upon his adversary, but also wrenching his ankle so severely as to retard his rise.

A fatal misstep!

Yet, his eyes glittered as wickedly, his visage lost none of its horrible ferocity. He grimly faced his foe, resting upon one knee, and brandishing his long blade defiantly.

Under such a disadvantage, and assured as he was, he could act solely upon the defensive.

Scarcely had he risen to his knee, when the scout was upon him with the force and swiftness of a thunderbolt. One sweeping, irresistible stroke, and the struggle was ended.

Long Pete had triumphed!

Yet not without cost. Blood trickled slowly through a long gash in the bosom of his buckskin shirt.

The lines in his grim, dark face relaxing, the red glow in his blue eyes fading out, the guide first bent upon his surroundings an earnest scrutiny, then examined the fallen braves.

The first of the three, stricken down by the heels of the guide, had breathed his last. His broad breast had been crushed in, producing fatal internal hemorrhages.

"Outlawed Apaches!" Long Pete muttered, as he bent over first one, then the other, of the silent forms. "Followers ov Death-Eagle, ther Merciless, too! I hate ter rob a human critter ov life—even a red-skin; but these bucks—waugh! they be meaner than hoss-thieves!"

There was an expression of relief, yet akin to disgust, upon his dusky face as he uttered the words. Without further delay, he secured his Winchester from the undergrowth, remounted and left the plateau, avoiding the path by which he had approached.

His intention was to join the wagon-trail as soon as possible, and with that end in view he pushed forward at as speedy a pace as the rough and uneven nature of the way would permit.

Even to a passing observer it would have been obvious that the old guide was in a brown study.

In truth, Long Pete was deeply worried. His fears for the ultimate safety of the wagon-train were of the gravest character.

Then, too, another important problem had presented itself: Where was Jackson Mordaunt, the father of Pauline? Had he fallen into the clutches of the Apaches infesting Dead-Tree Knob?

That at least was to be feared.

Jackson Mordaunt was to have reached the Knob at noon that day, and his errand was such that only something out of the ordinary could have detained him.

True, in the affairs of the Hidden Hope Mine, some new and vexing complication, requiring his personal attention, might have come to light; but in that event he would certainly have sent a proxy.

The more Long Pete pondered over the matter, the more restless and uneasy he became.

"Tain't es ef my pard was an ole Injun-fighter," he muttered, regretfully. "Ther leetle 'sperience he's gained in ther two or three skirmishes we've hed with the 'Paches w'u'dn't keep his head out ov sech a trap es they'd set ter snare him."

"But I cain't move hand er foot ter help 'im now. Ef I pull ther train an' ther gals out ov the present diffikilty, it's mighty apt ter bu'st a trace!"

Disconsolate enough were the half-audible words, although the dusky face of the guide was grim and determined.

The present incursion of the Apaches was nothing out of the ordinary. The worst feature of it was that the marauders were outlaw Indians, members of the band of Death-Eagle, the Merciless, and rather more to be dreaded than a like number of the tribe from which they had been outlawed.

In either case the situation would have been bad enough. Either faction would have clung

to the trail to the last, resorting to every devilish artifice their ingenuity could invent; but Death-Eagle and his braves, hunted by their tribe, would, perforce, be far more stealthy and underhanded in their black work--would strike from ambush, swiftly and without mercy.

Long Pete had a full conception of these latter facts, and as he descended the slope of 'the foot-hill his brain was anything but idle.

Too busy, in fact, for the full exercise of the wariness due his situation.

And yet, there wasn't much of importance to be overlooked—not, at least, until the branch of dry water-course was reached. And at that point Long Pete Jenkins awoke, all at once, into intense activity—a flash lighting up his blue eyes with wondrous quickness.

Just before him lay a fresh trail—deep and narrow, as if left in the yielding earth at that point by a score horses, or more, traveling in Indian-file around the foot-hill!

It was second-nature, just then, after a searching glance at his surroundings, for the scout to dismount and narrowly scrutinize not only the hoof-prints, but the earth for yards around.

"Umph!" he ejaculated, suddenly straightening to his full height. "Mebbe it's a sort ov killkinny cats' affair, arter all—red dog eat red dog! Ef so, so much ther better fer ther Mordaunt party!"

"This hyar lay-out c'u'dn't 'a' bin fur behind me a-comin' up ther gully, fer hyar is whar I left it, an' whar ther three spies split off from ther main party ter look arter my health—an' ha'r!"

A sound akin to a chuckle of satisfaction escaped Long Pete. Assuring himself that his weapons were in proper order he remounted, and, with a glance at the sun, turned from his course to follow the new trail a short distance.

Both curiosity and hope were aroused at this last discovery.

Should the party ahead prove to be Apaches, on the war-path against Death-Eagle's red outlaws, or just the contrary, it was not at all likely that either faction would have time or opportunity to pay its respects to the wagon-train within the next four-and-twenty hours.

During that time, by a forced march, the Mordaunts could reach their destination; so, it was with no mean degree of interest that Long Pete rode rapidly forward, yet exercising all possible caution.

A mile onward, the trail turned, leading down into a secluded little valley. Again the scout halted and dismounted, secreting his horse as at the plateau. His next move was to seek a point whence a good view of the valley was attainable.

As luck would have it, the desired advantage was within easy reach—a buttress of rock jutting out from the foot-hill, covered with a sparse growth of vines and bushes, and ending in an almost sheer descent of perhaps two hundred and fifty feet.

Out upon this buttress, Long Pete carefully made his way, extending himself at full length, head outward, at the extreme edge.

The scene that met his gaze was one to stir his blood.

At the foot of the precipice, almost directly beneath him, the red-skins were going into camp!

The plainsman needed no second glance to decide that they were neither part nor parcel of the outlawed faction; on the contrary, they were braves in pursuit of the insurrectionists.

It was not this fact, however, that had caused the blood to leap wildly through the veins of the scout, although he realized, in a vague sort of way, that it was not exactly what he had been led to expect—that it set his deductions somewhat at variance.

In the midst of the red-skins, his back to the earth, pinioned to firmly-driven stakes, was a captive.

A white man!

That much, and that only, was distinguishable from the top of the bluff.

In a trice, the field-glass was again brought in requisition, and with marked results.

The captive was none other than Jackson Mordaunt!

"My pard! by ther cradle ov Moses!" Long Pete exclaimed, with a sound little short of a groan, his dark face blanching.

For some minutes he studied the scene attentively. So far as he could determine, there was not the slightest chance to effect a rescue.

"Ther chief is Black Feathers, ef I'm not mighty mistaken," he mused. "A meaner nor a shrewder red cut-throat never lived. With a white hide, be'd 'a' bin a fu'st-class hoss-thief—or a shyster money-lender."

"But this hyar wrinkle kinder knocks my think-machine out ov kelter, somehow. Begins ter look es ef ther reds atop ov Dead-Tree Knob war a parcel belongin' ter ther gang ov Death-Eagle, es I figgered at fu'st! An' so ther three outlaws war trailin' this hyar party when they—"

"Ye gods! Pete Jenkins, ye durned ole rattle-brain! Ye—"

The soliloquy was rudely broken.

A heavy weight descended squarely upon the back of the giant ranger, just below the shoul-

ders, for the moment pinning him securely to the rock.

At the same instant, a set of long, claw-like fingers entwined themselves in his scanty locks—a murderous-looking knife swung aloft.

Too late had that warning thought occurred to the scout! The three red-skins turning aside at the gully to trail him down were not identical with the trio met and slain on the plateau!

But Long Pete Jenkins was not the man to die tamely.

No sooner did he feel the weight of the red-skin upon his back than he called all his latent powers into play, arching his spine with a suddenness and force that would have done credit to a bucking burro.

Unpremeditated in its effects, the action was requited with a result as novel as deadly.

Hurled from Long Pete's back, the wily Apache, with a horrible yell, fell clear of the rock, shooting downward with frightful velocity to death far below!

If disastrous to his foe, it seemed equally so to Long Pete; for, as he made an attempt to gain his feet to meet the remaining savages, he slipped, and, with a wild grasp at the rocks, fell over the verge, his piercing cry of horror ringing like a death-knell in the ears of the two braves!

CHAPTER VII.

TREACHERY.

"A WOMAN as pure and beautiful as any the sun shines upon this day!" were words aptly applied by Oscar Monshall to Pauline Mordaunt. Once, at least, the unscrupulous adventurer had uttered a truth.

One-and-twenty and a blonde beauty, was Pauline—a sensible, healthy, out-spoken, warm-hearted maiden; spirited and practical, yet refined, loving and lovable.

An ex-schoolma'm, and a lady in the full and true sense of that much-abused term, Pauline's accomplishments were as many and different as graceful and useful. At home in any department of the household, she sat in the saddle fearlessly, pulled a good oar, swam a bold stroke, and was an expert with rifle and revolver.

Needless to say, she had looked forward to this trip across the New Mexican plains with pleasurable anticipations, albeit she knew there were perils to be encountered. She was to meet her father, Jackson Mordaunt, and her betrothed, Richard Royale, neither of whom she had seen for close upon five years.

Royale was to have been at Palomas, to join the party on its arrival there; Mordaunt was to be at Dead-Tree Knob at noon of the twentieth of June, there to await the arrival of the train.

But Royale had not appeared at Palomas.

"He has been delayed," Pauline had said, keenly disappointed, yet with never a doubt as to his constancy; and accordingly Big Dale had been stationed at Palomas to await the lover's coming.

It was now the twentieth of June. The train was nearing Dead-Tree Knob—would make it the night's camp-ground. There Pauline was to meet her father, and her heart beat high until suddenly chilled by the warning of Long Pete Jenkins.

But she was a girl not easily daunted, and, when put face to face with the grim truth, she had ridden back to the train with unshaken nerves, confident that the tall old borderer would prove a safeguard against the threatened danger.

Arrived at the foremost of the three substantial, white-topped wagons, she was met by her cousin, Nellie Mordaunt, a black-eyed, fair-faced girl, Pauline's junior by two years, and the possessor of similar good traits, graces and accomplishments.

Nellie was also mounted and armed, and as she intercepted Pauline, the latter noticed a peculiar sparkle in her luminous black orbs.

At the same moment, Roger Mordaunt, the father of Nellie, rode up. His five-and-fifty years sat lightly upon him just then. His keen gray eyes were aglow with an ominous light, and hard, stern lines had usurped his usual kindly expression.

Glancing from one to the other, Pauline realized that something of a startling nature had transpired.

Roger Mordaunt did not trust his voice. With a look full of significance, he turned and rode aside, out of earshot of the wagons.

With a swift exchange of glances, the two girls followed.

"What is it, Nellie?" Pauline whispered.

"Something terrible—just what I do not know," was the equally guarded response. "Some discovery papa has made."

"Indians?"

"No: Mr. Jenkins told papa of them this morning. This is something of a different nature, I think."

At that moment Roger Mordaunt changed his course to one parallel with that of the train. Looking straight ahead, he said:

"Ride up, girls, and try to appear unconcerned. We are watched from the wagons, and it will hardly do, just now, to let those fellows see that we suspect anything."

The girls obeyed.

"What is wrong, Uncle Roger?" eagerly queried Pauline.

Roger Mordaunt slowly stroked his long gray beard a moment before replying. It was as if he wanted time to collect and arrange his thoughts.

"Pretty near everything seems to be moving crosswise, since morning," he said, finally, speaking to himself rather than to Pauline. "First, Jenkins apprises me of the fact that we are in danger of an attack from the Apaches; then Jose and Pedro are heard plotting mischief; and, finally, the horses show signs of going dead lame. All things considered, the horizon can hardly be said to be clear of clouds!"

"But the specific cause of the present perturbed state?" Pauline persisted.

"Yes, papa, tell us all about it," supplemented Nellie.

"Just as if explanations were not being made as rapidly as possible!" Mordaunt protested, a grave smile for the moment breaking the hard lines of his face.

"I suppose, Pauline, that Mr. Jenkins has informed you of the fact that we are likely to experience annoyance from the Indians?"

"He has, Uncle Roger."

"You were in advance of the train when he imparted the same information to Nellie and myself," pursued Roger Mordaunt; "but, as he promised to keep ward and watch over you, you were not recalled."

"It is about the Apaches, then, papa?"

"No, Nellie—at least not wholly," Mordaunt answered, after a moment's reflection. "Either of you know as much of that source of peril as I do."

"There are unlooked-for complications arising, rendering the situation not only of bewildering perplexity, but of supreme peril, and it is of them I wish to talk."

"We are here to listen, Uncle Roger."

"Yes, papa, and to do your bidding," Nellie added.

"Thanks for that assurance, my dear girls, for it is not at all unlikely that your courage and obedience may be put to a severe test!" exclaimed Roger Mordaunt, earnestly. "A wicked plot is afoot against us, and critical hours are at hand!"

"Does either of you remember a tall, rather handsome, but over-dressed and dissolute-looking fellow, who rendered himself extremely obnoxious to us through his inordinate curiosity, while we were at San Marcial?"

"Oh, yes; Rugg McBuff, he called himself," averred Pauline, quickly, her cheeks flushing.

"And from appearances a very good sort of person to have nothing to do with," Nellie added, dryly.

"Exactly!" declared Mordaunt. "Well, it seems that while we were at San Marcial the fellow received a pretty sharp rebuff from some one of our party—"

"Not only that, but a thorough flagellation at the hands of Mr. Jenkins," Pauline quietly interposed. "He deserved it, too!"

"Eh? A thrashing, you say?"

"Yes, papa: a genuine *licking*, as we used to call it down South!" cried Nellie, with sparkling eyes. "You see, the fellow presumed to approach us—or, rather, Pauline—in a manner a trifle too familiar, whereupon Mr. Jenkins induced him to step aside for a few minutes. We were bothered no more!"

"May the Lord bless Pete Jenkins!" Mordaunt fervently ejaculated. "But the occurrence is news to me."

"Mr. Jenkins seemed to desire the matter to drop there, and I, too, was willing to hear no more of it," explained Pauline.

"Commendable on the part of both of you," Mordaunt commented. "Unhappily, however, this McBuff has not been satisfied to adopt the same sensible course. He is athirst for revenge."

"It is by him we are threatened!" exclaimed Pauline, indignantly.

"It is by him!" was the ready affirmation.

"With consummate cunning has he plotted, and but the merest chance has led to his detection."

"For days past he has followed the trail at a distance, depending upon his hirelings to advise him of a propitious moment to strike."

"His hirelings, papa?"

"Yes, child, his hirelings—Jose and Pedro, the Mexicans. It is just a short half-hour since chance put me in the way to overhear a conversation between the precious scoundrels."

"This McBuff has been in communication with them nightly since we left Palomas. The trio have been biding their time for a two-fold purpose—to be within easy reach of the mountains, and to have Long Pete Jenkins out of the way."

Pauline looked up quickly.

"At the present moment, the conditions are exactly fulfilled!" she exclaimed.

"To the letter!" and Roger Mordaunt smiled grimly. "The hour McBuff has waited and plotted for is at hand! Already Jose and Pedro, having gotten an inkling that Jenkins would be away during the afternoon, have signaled the villain to approach!"

"But, papa, tell us just what this McBuff proposes to do—how we can thwart him," requested Nellie, her eyes flashing.

"We will not submit without a struggle!" Pauline declared, decisively.

Roger Mordaunt smiled encouragingly.

"Well said, my brave girls!" he exclaimed, looking fondly from one to the other. "Now, as to the first part of Nellie's request, all I know of what McBuff proposes to do, is that you girls are to be captured, at whatever cost, and carried away to the mountains. I dare say, however, that that is only the opening wedge of a deep-laid scheme; for I've an idea that the rascals have gotten an inkling of the Hidden Hope, and are working in the direction of the mine."

"A reasonable supposition," Pauline admitted. "But such a state of affairs would be peculiarly exasperating, after our having traveled something over a hundred miles out of the way to avert suspicion. Coming by Palomas, we have doubled on our trail."

"True," Mordaunt asserted; "but, in spite of all our caution, the matter has in some way leaked out. McBuff would hardly have followed us so far merely for revenge."

"Now, the real point to be considered is our defense."

"Are the negroes arrayed against us?" inquired Nellie.

"I know only that Jose counted on having no trouble with them."

"We may depend upon Snowflake," Pauline asserted. "He is the only one of the three that could be trusted by either side."

"I shall find if he is friendly to us within the next few minutes," said Mordaunt. "If he casts his lot with us, we can overpower and disarm Jose and Pedro, after which preparations may be made to give Rugg McBuff the sort of reception he so richly merits."

"But if Snowflake has joined hands with the plotters, the odds will be so great that we may be forced to make a running fight of it."

"In which case we shall have to abandon the wagons," supplemented Nellie.

"And head for Dead-Tree Knob," Pauline added.

"In any event, we shall have to abandon the train to reach the Knob to-night," averred Mordaunt. "Just after noon the scoundrels 'fixed' the horses, laming them, so as to compel a halt in a short time. They are playing a desperate game!"

"They are, indeed!" Pauline exclaimed, with renewed indignation. "I only wish Mr. Jenkins were here!"

"Not more fervently than I!" said Mordaunt, earnestly, as he cast a searching glance at the train. "The miscreants deserve hanging, every jackal of 'em! They are cowardly curs, but were shrewd enough to get the odds altogether in their favor."

"It is strange night was not selected as the time for action," Pauline remarked, bitterly. "Darkness befits such deeds."

"Night was the time originally fixed upon, as I understand it," explained Mordaunt; "but, owing to the vigilance of Mr. Jenkins and the wholesome fear in which they held him, they amended their plans."

"But look to yourselves for a moment, for I now will go and seek Snowflake," and Roger Mordaunt turned toward the train.

The girls rode on, an awkward silence coming over them.

Finally, Nellie looked steadily at her fair cousin a moment.

Pauline returned the gaze with interest.

"Well, Pauline, what are we going to do about it?"

"Fight!" Pauline replied, laconically, her clear gray eyes shifting to the plain ahead; "put the skill earned for amusement's sake to its first really good use."

"Good! I glory in your Yankee spunk!" cried Nellie, impulsively. "We'll try to teach Mr. Rugg McBuff a thorough lesson!"

"One he'll remember to his dying day!"

"Paullie!"

"Well, Nell?"

"I cannot help thinking this would be a most propitious moment for Mr. Dick Royale and that young and handsome friend of his to put in their appearance."

"It would, indeed!" and a sound not far removed from a sigh escaped Pauline. "Do you know, Nell, that I have been troubled for nearly a month past with a premonitory feeling that all is not well with poor Dick—that he and I have met for the last time in this world."

Nellie Mordaunt bestowed upon the half-averted face of her cousin a swift, keen glance.

"Nonsense!" she returned, energetically. "Now, do you know how I feel in the matter?"

Pauline, flushing painfully, returned a feeble negative.

"Well, I'll tell you," volunteered Nellie, with a roguish grimace. "For quite a long time past I've been possessed of a 'premonitory feeling' as you call it, too—a feeling that the sterner sex in general, Mr. Dick Royale in particular, are very likely to indulge their whims, regardless of—"

"Don't, Nell!" protested Pauline, piteously.

"Dick is true to his vows if living—died true to them if dead!"

"You dear, deluded goose! I happen to know that as well as you do. Only, Paullie, I'm a trifle more hopeful—inasmuch as it isn't exactly my own heart-strings that are under tension."

"In fact, I have the strongest kind of an impression that the bonny boy will turn up within the next twenty-four hours, eager to claim his bride!"

A vivid flush stained the throat and face of Pauline. Dared she hope as much?

"Here comes Uncle Roger," she remarked, her voice low and quivering, as she vainly attempted to hide her confusion.

True enough, Roger Mordaunt had again left the train.

Taking their cue from him, the two girls rode on, their bearing one of well-simulated carelessness.

"What success?" queried Pauline, eagerly, as he fell into line.

The reply was most unexpected.

"The negroes, Snowflake included, have been drugged into insensibility."

So hoarse with anger was Mordaunt that his words were scarcely above a whisper.

Pauline's face grew deathly pale. A dangerous glint leaped into her gray eyes.

"Treachery—bitter, black treachery!" she enunciated, in strains so low the words came with a far-away sound.

"Treachery!" echoed Nellie Mordaunt, and then, for the space of a minute, all were silent.

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO RIVAL GIRLS.

THE situation was disheartening—appalling. The trio could but mutely look at one another.

Needless to say, all betrayed signs of agitation.

It was their first experience of the kind, and one well calculated to test their courage!

Adrift on a pathless plain, surrounded by dangers known and unknown!

Three desperadoes in virtual possession of the train, a horde of lurking Apaches biding their time!

"Yet, there was a grim, determined glint in the eyes of Roger Mordaunt, a look of fixed resolve on the faces of the two fair girls.

Flight would be their last resort!

"Suppose we open the struggle!" suggested Pauline.

Roger Mordaunt looked askance.

"The odds are now slightly in our favor," pursued the girl. "If we put off the evil hour until the arrival of Rugg McBuff, our enemies will hold the advantage, forcing us to act solely upon the defensive."

"Very true," Mordaunt admitted. "But am I to understand that you girls have determined to take an active part in the impending struggle?"

"Yes, sir; that is what we have decided to do," returned Pauline.

"It would be utterly out of the question for us to remain passive," Nellie affirmed.

Roger Mordaunt looked slowly from one to the other.

"So be it, then," he said. "The spirit, in itself, is laudable; but I must protest against any unnecessary exposure or risk; you must proceed cautiously, and obey orders.

"Jose and Pedro are desperate ruffians, and will now go to the full extremity to insure the ultimate success of their plans. Hence, whatever we may decide to do must be done quickly and well. They must be afforded no chance either to resist or to escape."

"Exactly! They must be captured before they can realize the turn affairs are taking. May I make a suggestion?"

"Certainly, Pauline."

"First, then, there are, at the present moment, only Jose and Pedro arrayed against us?"

"Correct."

"And their positions?"

"Pedro is driving the foremost wagon, Jose the rearmost."

"And the negroes?"

"In the middle wagon, which is without a driver, as Snowflake is simply propped into his place."

"Anything occurring at the rear of the train could not be seen from the leading wagon?"

"Not readily."

"It is as I thought. Suppose, then, that we make the attack from the rear. Approaching the wagon, Nell and myself could, to use the vernacular, get the 'drop' on the Senor Jose, keeping him covered until he could be disarmed, bound and gagged by you, after which Pedro might be subjected to a like process."

"A very good suggestion," Roger Mordaunt commented. "In fact, there is but one course other than the one you have just outlined—to ride up and shoot down the treacherous varlets."

"Greatly as they deserve such a fate, however, that must be the last recourse. We'll adopt Pauline's plan, and deliver the miscreants over to Mr. Jenkins on his return."

"And the sooner we execute the plan the bet-

ter," declared Nellie. "Rugg McBuff may arrive at any minute."

"True; are your weapons in readiness?"

"Mr. Jenkins has taught us ever to have them so, Uncle Roger," Pauline replied.

"Very well then; we'll get to work. Remember, at the word *fraud*, you are both to cover Jose," and Roger Mordaunt turned toward the train, closely followed by the two pale, but thoroughly determined girls.

Leisurely enough the two rode forward, keeping up a semblance of carelessness. To a casual observer they were simply returning from a canter over the plain.

On reaching the wagon, Pauline passed around it, pushing slightly ahead on the off side, while Mordaunt and his daughter, on the opposite side, took a position beside the team.

The Mexican, Jose, was upon the seat, his swarthy face wrinkled into an expression of deep concern. At best he was an evil-looking fellow, but just now he looked the born cutthroat.

He seemed to hail the appearance of his employer with a breath of relief.

"Senor Mordaunt!"

"Well, Jose?"

"We soon have to stop now."

"Are the horses so lame?"

"Lame! *Dios!* Senor, would you see?"

There could be no question as to the truth of the Mexican's assertion. The horses were proceeding with great difficulty.

Roger Mordaunt's face flushed hotly. The animals were suffering from some devilish trick of the evil genius upon the box.

"I see, Jose—I see!" he exclaimed. "It is as you say—the poor brutes are lame. What could have caused it?"

"That I not know, Senor Mordaunt," returned the yellow rascal, with a puzzled look. "Mebbe this—mebbe that."

"Treachery, Jose—treachery somewhere!"

"Caramba! Yes, senor! Jenkins?"

"No!"

"Apaches?"

"Nor the Apaches."

"Ho! the black men?"

"No, not the black men," and Mordaunt smiled grimly at the rascal's look of consternation.

"The fact is, Jose, we've come to the conclusion that you are an elaborate, monumental *fraud*. Don't get excited, now. Don't make the least noise, nor attempt to draw, for our suspicions and our guns point in the same direction."

True enough; three revolvers were leveled straight at the heart of Jose Nalaja. At the talismanic word, Pauline and her cousin had performed their part of the programme like veterans of the plains.

The scoundrel blenched. He was fairly caught, and he knew it.

"Dios! Senor—"

"Hush! not a word, now!" warned Roger Mordaunt crisply. "Stop the horses. I am going to get upon the seat beside you. Don't move or attempt to drop the lines—or you'll die quick!"

Jose's face portrayed the passions of a demon as Mordaunt swung slowly from the saddle. His teeth clicked together, and his narrow black eyes glittered venomously; but he obeyed orders with a lamb-like meekness.

No sooner had Roger Mordaunt got foot to ground than an important fact was developed. He was a cripple, and almost helpless out of the saddle. He had been at Bull Run.

It was with the utmost difficulty that he reached the wagon and clambered to a seat beside Jose.

Small wonder the two brave girls were so bitterly determined.

Once perched upon the seat, however, Mordaunt experienced little difficulty in completing the task so well begun. Jose was disarmed and his hands were pinioned, after which a gag was improvised and properly applied.

"There! Senor Jose, my talented friend!" Mordaunt uttered with a breath of relief, as he tested the result of his labors; "Rugg McBuff may count upon one tool the less."

"Now for the lesser light!" exclaimed Pauline, her voice betraying no mean degree of satisfaction. "What a pity the arch-spirit himself isn't here to be operated upon."

"He will put in an appearance soon enough, never fear!" quoth Nellie, leading her father's horse close to the wagon to facilitate his remounting.

"All too soon, my children!" declared Mordaunt, as he settled himself in the saddle. "If he is the desperado this plot stamps him, he will be no child's play for us."

"Let us draw Pedro's fangs, after which we shall have leisure to plan a fitting reception for McBuff."

Starting the team attached to the wagon and leaving it to pick its way, the trio rode forward to the head of the train.

The first intimation of their purpose received by Pedro Cormenta was a stern demand to surrender. As it was reinforced by a threatening display of weapons, the burly rascal at once dropped the reins and threw up his hands.

Within five minutes, he, too, was disarmed, bound and gagged.

"Thank Heaven! the campaign against treachery has thus far been a complete success!" breathed Roger Mordaunt after he had again returned to the saddle.

"But in cutting off one source of peril we have augmented another," suggested Pauline. "What if the Apaches should now make their appearance?"

Nellie uttered a low cry of affright.

"Such a possibility had not occurred to me," she exclaimed. "What would we do, papa?"

Roger Mordaunt stroked his long beard reflectively.

"That very thought has worried me for an hour past," he admitted, reluctantly. "So far as I can see at the present moment, our only alternative would be to fight till the last."

"We would draw the wagons up as best we could, corral the animals in the triangle thus formed, and then use our Winchesters and revolvers with the greatest possible effect."

"But there is a possibility that our forces are not weakened to an appreciable extent. It is true that nothing is to be expected of Jose and Pedro; but by recourse to the medicine-chest, the negroes may be brought out of their stupor in time to be available."

"Again, I am of the belief that we are in no immediate danger of an attack. Had such been the case, Mr. Jenkins would not have ridden ahead to reconnoiter. His experience in matters of this kind has been so wide that I am quite willing to pin my faith to his judgment."

"We'll use every precaution, however. First of all we'll set to work to resuscitate Snowflake and his companions. After that—"

A sharp cry from Pauline interrupted Roger Mordaunt.

"Look! McBuff comes!" she cried.

Her companions glanced in the direction indicated by her pointing finger.

Across the plain to the southeast, in bold relief on the crest of a swell, was a horseman, rapidly approaching the train.

"The last knot wasn't tied a breath too soon!" observed Nellie. "At the rate he is coming he will overtake us in a very few minutes."

"At all events, my suspicions concerning Jose and Pedro are being rapidly realized," Mordaunt muttered. "We may as well prepare to receive this McBuff."

"Shall we stop the train?" queried Pauline.

Mordaunt shook his head in a decided manner.

"We'll push forward every foot that we can toward Dead-Tree Knob," he replied. "When McBuff has arrived within three hundred yards, we'll stop the teams until we have squared accounts with him."

"If he offers to advance after being warned to turn back, fire. If he is killed, the blood be upon his own head!"

There was a terrible earnestness in the strains of Roger Mordaunt's voice. Of all things, he most disliked and despised a trickster and a rogue.

Then, too, the plot against those near and dear to him had stirred him deeply. A worshiper of the pure and beautiful, holding the name of woman sacredly inviolable, he had almost strangled with indignation and wrath when the full purpose of McBuff's evil scheme dawned upon him.

Contrary to the expectations of the trio, it was almost an hour before the stranger drew near enough to confirm their suspicions as to his identity. During that time the train had dragged slowly along, guided by Roger Mordaunt.

"It is McBuff!" Pauline declared, after a searching look at the horseman.

"We'll meet him at the rear of the train," said Mordaunt, grimly. "The wagons may as well be stopped here."

He suited the action to the words. Silently the trio turned and retraced their steps to the end of the train.

Three a disagreeable surprise awaited them. Jose Nalaja had vanished!

CHAPTER IX.

RUGG MCBUFF APPEARS.

A STRIKING-looking personage was the horseman approaching the Mordaunt train.

A young man, tall and well proportioned, with black eyes, hair and mustache; clothed in buckskin, with high-topped patent-leather boots and broad white sombrero, a gay silk kerchief knotted loosely about his neck and held in place by a costly diamond pin; armed with repeating-rifle, revolvers and knife, the firearms of finest make and heavy caliber, the blade a dangerous-looking tool of twist steel; his horse, a clean-limbed bay of speed and bottom. He rode with the ease and grace of one to the saddle born.

A handsome, dashing-looking fellow, yet not one to inspire confidence; for in the fathomless depths of his bold black eyes—in the cynical smile frozen upon his full red lips—in the very cast of his smoothly-molded features—there was an indefinable something, hinting at falseness, begetting suspicion.

His eyes flashed wickedly, and there was a triumphant look upon his face as he spurred

swiftly toward the train; and more, for his lips moved, and he muttered:

"Jose has done his work well, for the horses limp at every step! With Jenkins out of the way, the negroes drugged, and Mordaunt a helpless cripple, the game, bold as it is, is easily played. With the girls once in our power, we can defy pursuit—if pursuit is made!"

Scarcely had he uttered the exultant words when his horse shied sharply and with a snort of alarm fell back upon its haunches.

At the same instant the rider uttered a cry of amazement.

Just before him, upon his knees in the tall grass, his hands firmly bound, a gag fitted closely over his mouth, his face fiendish in the intensity of his rage, was Jose Nalaja!

"Speak of the devil!" gritted the horseman, with an oath, his look of triumph fading into one of consternation as he noted in detail the features of Nalaja's predicament. "What ails you, Jose? Has— But wait— Maybe you'll talk better relieved of that gag!"

"It was the work of but a moment for the rider to slip from the saddle and sever the Mexican's bonds and the cords holding the gag in place.

"Ah! Senor McBuff!" sputtered Jose, stretching his cramped arms. "It is in time you have come!"

"What is wrong?" demanded the horsemen, savagely. "Curse you! have you bungled?"

The Mexican's facial expression was simply frightful.

"Curse not me, but the Senor Mordaunt, Senor McBuff!" he hissed, madly. "Caramba! Him will I give the knife!"

"You will do nothing of the sort!" coolly asserted Rugg McBuff. "Keep down in the grass, you yellow fool! They have not seen you yet, and perhaps it is not too late to put our plans into effect.

"But tell your story, and tell it quickly. What means your being here?"

"That I not tell now," growled Jose sullenly chafing his wrists. "Give me the weapons, senor, and I will go and release Pedro. Then we capture the señoritas."

"Pedro, too, in *hoc*?"

"Yes, senor, we were surprised, one at a time, and tied up. My feet were not bound and I jumped from the wagon into the tall grass when the Senor Mordaunt and the señoritas had ridden forward to catch Pedro, and crept out to meet you."

"And I will not forget it, Jose. But what led the Mordaunt party to attack you?"

"That I not know, senor."

"Jenkins is away?"

"He is, senor."

"And the negroes, Jose?"

"Like dead men."

"But I must away, senor, or the Mordaunt will suspect something. Ride forward slowly, and when a cricket chirrups you may know that Jose and Pedro are near and ready for the work."

"Good! Here, take this knife and my extra revolvers; but remember, under no circumstances, except to save our own lives, is Mordaunt to be injured."

"I will not spoil the chances for the mine," sneered Jose, with a cunning leer, and he turned and crept away through the waving grass.

During the greater part of the time he had been dismounted, Rugg McBuff had made a pretense of fixing his saddle-girth. The wagon-train was but a few hundred yards distant, and the desperado was in no wise anxious to have Roger Mordaunt even suspect what was really transpiring.

Mounting, he set forward at a leisurely pace. From the first he had calculated boldly to approach the train, and, with the assistance of his two satellites, overpower Mordaunt and capture the two girls.

Now, however, it was more than likely that he would be received in a manner decidedly hostile, and it behooved him to advance with caution.

Then, too, Jose must have time in which to do his work. It was likely that Pedro was confined in one of the wagons, in which case the longer McBuff could hold the attention of Mordaunt and the girls the better would be Jose's opportunity to effect his countryman's release.

So McBuff rode forward, patiently walking his horse until within seventy-five yards of the position taken by Roger Mordaunt and his two fair charges.

Then loud and clear rung forth the challenge:

"Hold! Advance another step at your own peril!"

Halting, McBuff raised his empty hands. Three Winchesters were leveled at him. He gritted his teeth savagely.

The next instant his heart leaped with exultation.

Jose had gained the train—was even then clambering into the foremost wagon.

"What would you have?" McBuff cried, in pretended astonishment.

"Give an account of yourself!" demanded Mordaunt.

"Willingly! I am Tom Earnshaw—Tule

Rosa Tom—a scout in the Government's employ. Just now I am trailing a party of marauding Apaches."

"You lie! You are one Rugg McBuff, a gambler and a blackleg. And you've got just one minute in which to make yourself scarce!"

"I reckon not!" cried McBuff, slowly and contemptuously. "Let me tell you, old man, it is not the part of wisdom for you to interfere with me. I do not fear you. My trail lies straight ahead!"

"Don't you advance!" warned Mordaunt.

"Turn back, or, by the Power above, we'll—"

The sound of a dull, heavy blow, and with the sentence unfinished Roger Mordaunt fell limply from his saddle.

Almost in the same breath a pair of agile forms, vaulting upward with pantherish ease, alighted firmly astride the horses ridden by Pauline and her cousin.

Jose Nalaja had succeeded!

The moment Rugg McBuff had awaited was at hand.

Vainly the girls struggled and screamed.

They were powerless in the strong arms of the Mexicans, and were quickly disarmed.

McBuff hurried forward, his evil face aglow with satisfaction.

"Senor, we have not bungled!" cried Jose.

"You have not, indeed! Our scheme is a complete success!" McBuff returned, exultantly.

Then, in strains of mock regret, as his bold black eyes sought Pauline's face:

"A thousand apologies, dear ladies, for this intrusion! Believe me no harm, even in the slightest, shall befall you! This whole miserable affair is but a step toward the attainment of a great end, and as unavoidable as necessary. Your detention is for the time being only, and—"

"Enough! Fra Diavolo!" Pauline coldly interrupted. "There can be no excuse—no palliation—for your conduct. And you will be punished in due time. San Marcial will prove to have been only a foretaste!"

Truly, the words reached a vulnerable point. McBuff's face grew fiery red—his black eyes flashed madly. He essayed to speak, but his voice failed him. His teeth shot together with a sharp click, and for a moment he sat speechless, his expression grim and bitter.

"Bind the jades, boys!" he muttered, at length; "bind them hard and fast. Maybe they'll take a different view of matters, by-and-by!"

"Hold! mighty satraps! I reckon I'd like a hand in this hyar leetle game!" interposed a new voice, stern yet bantering. "Take a fool's advice, you galoots, and don't crowd things *too* hard!"

McBuff and his villainous allies started sharply.

They were face to face with an unexpected peril!

Forth from behind the wagon a few paces distant strode a man—a well-built, athletic-looking young fellow—grimed and travel-stained, yet handsome and of prepossessing appearance.

His dark eyes gleamed brightly, and in each hand was a "six," ready for use.

It was not this latter fact, however, that struck terror to the soul of the leader of the unscrupulous trio, although from the new-comer's appearance he was no novice with the "tools."

Rather would Rugg McBuff have encountered three ordinary men, just then, than this handsome stranger!

A border sport—a genuine thoroughbred—and the last man in all the world McBuff could have wished to see at such a juncture!

"Royal Richard, of the Red Hand!"

That was the sum and substance of the thoughts fairly burning into Rugg McBuff's brain, and he felt weak and faint as the full portent of it all burst upon him.

Yet he would not yield his prize without a struggle.

A moment of deathlike silence followed the words of the stranger sport. Then again he spoke:

"Get down and out of that, you Greasers! Quick, or I'll drop you!"

How the hearts of Nellie Mordaunt and her fair cousin thrilled at the words of the blunt, fearless stranger! It was one against three, yet they dared hope!

The words seemed to arouse Rugg McBuff from his abstraction. His black eyes kindled.

"Pardner, you're getting into hot water!" he exclaimed, warningly. "We're running this game, and the best thing you can do is to mosey! Plain enough, isn't it?"

"Absolutely homely!" was the cool response.

"But your powder's wasted, all the same!"

"You see, I know you, Danton—Desperate Dave—and it's no news to me that you're an arrant coward."

"If you've any desire to live a little longer, you'll call off your yellow hounds, and make yourself scarce. Otherwise, I'll sail in to clean out the three of you!"

Rugg McBuff uttered a sneering laugh. His hands settled firmly around the butts of his revolvers.

"Oh, you will, eh?" he cried. "I say, you do it well, Royal Richard! But—Take that!" Just a breath too late, was the desperado!

The weapons of the Red Hand Sport cracked spitefully—once, twice, three times, and so closely together that the shots seemed one.

A slight scream from Pauline and Nellie, a sudden plunging and rearing of the horses, and then Jose and Pedro, each with a bullet in his head, slipped from behind the girls, to fall at full length in the rank grass!

Simultaneously, a bitter oath escaped Rugg McBuff. Bending low in the saddle, he urged his horse forward with a savage thrust of his cruel Mexican spurs, dashing away with the swiftness of a racer on the home stretch.

A moment Royal Richard gazed after his fleeing foe, a peculiar expression on his bronzed face, then thrust his revolvers into his belt and with an eager smile turned to the two girls.

"The battle is over, ladies," he announced, doffing his broad-brimmed sombrero, as he advanced. "Now let us look to the wounded. But permit me, first, to assist you from the saddle."

Brave unto recklessness, and gallant, yet quiet and unpretentious, his clear, flexible voice betraying more of regret than of aught else, the Red-Hand Sport excited in his fair auditors—dazed though they were by the peril they had just passed—feelings of unalloyed admiration and respect.

The trio bent over Roger Mordaunt a minute later and Nellie blanched to deathly whiteness as she gazed into her father's pallid face.

"He is unconscious, ladies—nothing more," assured Royal Richard, quick to note their alarm and agitation. "It was a dastard blow, delivered from behind, and before I could prevent it. It is a terrible thing to take life, but I can only feel thankful that my bullets sped true."

"But let me remove him from this spot. With brandy and water, he will quickly regain consciousness."

"There are both in the wagon at the head of the train," Pauline said, speaking for the first time since the daring rescue.

Lifting Roger Mordaunt in his powerful arms, Royal Richard strode forward. The two girls followed, leading the horses.

"What a terrible experience!" exclaimed Nellie, shuddering, as they passed the lifeless forms of Jose and Pedro. "But for this stranger, Rugg McBuff's evil plot would have succeeded only too well!"

"We owe the gentleman more than words can express," Pauline gravely responded. "His arrival seems little short of a dispensation of a merciful Providence."

"Poor papa!" murmured Nellie, and then with a sudden revulsion of feeling the poor girl burst into tears.

At the head of the train, the Red-Hand Sport gently laid Mordaunt at full length in the grass, his face shielded from the sun.

The work of resuscitation was speedy and effective.

Roger Mordaunt raised himself to a sitting posture, and, with a short, sharp gasp, opened his eyes.

At first, he could hardly credit what he saw, but full explanations were at once made by the overjoyed girls, and he arose to thank their deliverer.

Royal Richard had drawn aside.

At the moment Mordaunt reached his feet, the sound of hoof-strokes came faintly over the plain, attracting the attention of the three.

"He is gone!" cried Nellie, the new-born flush fading from her face.

"He pursues McBuff!" Pauline added, a spice of excitement in her voice.

True enough; mounted upon a magnificent black horse, the Red-Hand Sport, with a last wave of his hand at the little party, coursed swiftly across the plain on the trail of the fleeing desperado.

CHAPTER X.

LONG PETE'S PARD.

NEVER, in all his long and eventful career, had Long Pete Jenkins been face to face with death in a form so terrible as that which menaced him at the moment he slipped over the verge of the cliff overshadowing the Apache camp.

In that moment of supreme peril, his mind became almost a blank, the only feeling of which he was conscious being one of horror so intense as to wring from him a cry of awful anguish and despair.

Downward he shot, feet first, facing the rocks, with a mad, wild gasp at the jutting verge—downward, until—

A shock that seemed to shiver every bone in his lank body, and he pitched forward upon his face, a senseless heap!

Near unto death had been Long Pete Jenkins. A foot to the right, or a foot to the left, and no power on earth could have saved him.

Fifteen feet below the verge, a narrow ledge, or terrace, extended across the face of the bluff, and it was upon a slender spur, jutting out some three feet from the edge of this terrace, that the scout had fallen.

As a matter of course, he was stunned into insensibility. It seemed as if the last spark of life had been knocked from his body.

For hours he lay unconscious. Twilight had settled over the valley below when he first evinced signs of returning animation.

"Oh, Lord! I thank Thee!"

His voice low and tremulous as he uttered the fervent ejaculation, Long Pete sat up and surveyed his surroundings.

Dazed as he yet was, it required no second glance to assure him that his position was far from enviable.

In fact, so far as he could determine, his escape from the ledge was decidedly problematical. The terrace was so narrow, in places, that he doubted if he could secure a foothold.

At such a time and under such conditions, that he should be beset by a train of distressing thought was simply inevitable.

What would the end be?

Would he slowly perish of thirst and hunger?

Or, bereft of reason by his intense suffering, might he not dash himself headlong from the cliff to death upon the rocks far below?

And, yet worse, what would be the fate of Jackson Mordaunt?

And of the wagon-train—of the bright-eyed girl he had vowed to deliver safely into her father's arms?

Irony of fate! He who had courted death on a hundred fields now shrunk from the mere thought of it!

Ay and more! He grew sick at heart, not at the terrors of his position, but at the thought that, if he perished there, no saving hand was between his friends and certain doom!

In the midst of these harrowing thoughts there came a sound that sent a strange, sweet thrill through his aching fibers.

It was the one word. "Pete!"

For a moment the giant scout doubted the evidence of his ears. The husky, cautiously-uttered call was a trick of his overwrought imagination!

"Pete! Oh, Pete!"

This time there could be no mistake! Some one was calling to him from the top of the bluff!

In an instant Jenkins was upon his feet.

"Hello! hello!" he exclaimed, guardedly.

Back came the voice:

"Alive, eh? Much hurted, pard?"

"Be that you, Dan Yuba?"

"I be that same, ye blessed ole sinner!"

"Then, Dan, I ben't much hurt, I reckon. Aire things all quiet above?"

"As a Quaker meetin', pard. Kin ye git off yer roost, down thar?"

"On'y by suicidin', Dan! Can't toss me ther eend ov yer lariat, kin ye?"

"Wait!"

Long Pete fancied he could hear the sound of retreating footsteps. Then, in a few minutes—an age it seemed to the imprisoned borderer—there was a slight noise at the top of the bluff, and the noosed end of the lariat fell upon the spur of rock at his feet.

"W'en ye're ready, guv ther word, an' I'll h'ist away," came the cautious voice of Dan Yuba. "Don't be afeerd ther lariat will part with ye. My ole buckskin shirt is 'twixt it an' ther aige on ther rock!"

Almost before he had ceased speaking, Long Pete signaled him to pull away.

It was an arduous task, and perilous as well; but sturdy Dan Yuba was equal to the emergency, and at the expiration of three minutes Long Pete Jenkins had him by the hand, shaking it with a zest that was absolutely painful.

"Dan, ye sawed-off besom! whar on airth d'y'e drap from?" the giant exclaimed, evincing a strong desire to embrace his rescuer. "D'y'e know, I'd jist made up my mind I'd folered my last trail—drapped my last red-skin!"

"Straight from the Hidden Hope, with ther boss," replied Yuba. "But git out ov hyar, ye pinnacle ov glory! In less'n three minutes thar'll be more reds jump this locate than ye kin count on fingers an' toes! Talk's cheap—but it'd be dear in this market!"

"Kerrect! I've bin thar!" Long Pete averred, nodding grimly. "But I've a hoss an' a gun over hyar, if the 'Paches hav'n't gobbl'd 'em. Wait—"

"I got 'em a good two hours ago," broke in Yuba, setting forward. "Be y'r sixes all right?"

Examining his weapons, Long Pete returned an affirmative answer.

The two bordermen proceeded slowly for perhaps ten minutes, covering their trail with the greatest care. At the expiration of that time, Dan Yuba halted and parted a dense curtain of vines, revealing a large niche in the side of the hill.

"Hyar we aire, an' thar's yer beast," he announced, with a flourish, as the vines swung into place behind them.

Short and stocky, with broad shoulders and heavy, powerful-looking limbs, Dan Yuba had much the appearance of a dwarfed Hercules. His eyes were black, as were his hair and beard, the latter being long and bushy.

His age would have been put at any point between thirty-five and forty years. He was

thoroughly armed and wore a plainsman's garb.

Light-hearted, whimsical and full of quaint conceit, yet the possessor of of indomitable courage, and surpassing an Indian in cunning and caution, he was a prime favorite with Long Pete Jenkins.

Once under cover, the pards lost little time in comparing notes.

"Fu'st ov all, Dan Yuba," exclaimed the giant scout, throwing himself at full length on the dry earth, "I'm goin' ter stretch my bones back into theyr places, an' while I'm doin' it ye kin keep a peeper peeled fer reds an' post me up a little. I'm b'ilin' over with curiosity!"

"Pears so, pard," observed Yuba, quietly. "It's mighty little I've got ter tell, an' more bad than good in that."

"Everything was quiet at ther Hidden Hope when we left at noon yesterday, though thar has bin sum powerful queer things happened 'round thar in ther last week."

"Mordaunt an' myself kalkilated ter reach Dead-Tree Knob at noon to-day, but we run foul ov a band ov Apaches under Black Feathers this mornin', an' ter save our ha'r we war forced ter separate."

"Ther upshot ov it war thar ther reds gobbed him. I made off all right, but circled 'round an' struck theyr trail five mile back, an' run it right up ter theyr camp."

"An' so ye see'd ther scrimmage atop ov the bluff?" queried Long Pete.

"A part ov it, yes, but not ther beginnin'. I war 'bout three hundred yards furder along, lyin' in ther bresh, an' jest happened ter look over my shoulder in time ter see ther red shoot over ther cliff. Tell ye, pard, my heart beat a tattoo ag'in' ther roof ov my mouth when I see'd ve slip over ther rocks."

"But when ye struck ther ledge, I knew everything war serene, fer even ef ther reds diskivered ye they c'u'dn't git at ye!"

"An' ther two 'Paches who war behind me?"

"They started fer ther camp in ther valley, lickety-split! It was then that I looled up yer hoss an' yer gun. By ther time I got back inter my place on ther slope ov ther hill, a dozen braves war prowlin' about atop ov ther bluff. But ther riddle war too deep, an' they giv it up."

Long Pete then narrated the more important incidents of the trip of himself and Big Dale to San Marcial, in conclusion, saying:

"Now, Dan, le's sum up ther state ov affairs, an' map out ther work afore us—fer I kalkilate we'll hev ter putt in some purty big licks, this night."

"Sort ov give ther red-skins ther Dan Yuba waltz!" grimly suggested the dwarfed Hercules.

"Jes' so, pard," Long Pete wearily assented. "Et's a pity Ginal Crook wasn't ordered ter wipe out or round up every derned Apache in Arizona and New Mexico. These hyar Chiricahua bucks need jest sech a lesson es ther other 'Pache bands caught at Salt Lake Canyon."

"Or Turret Butte, or Superstition Mountain!" supplemented Dan Yuba, his black eyes kindling. "Them war ga-lorious days, Pete!"

"You ket! an' these hyar Chiricahuas will git ther same dose—arter they've killed an' plundered ter theyr hearts' content, the devils!"

"But do ye know, Dan, what brings them over ther Mimbres, jest at this time?"

"I hav'n't tried ter figger it out, pard."

"Wal, it's just this: Black Feathers an' a band ov picked warriors aire on ther trail ov Death-Eagle an' his renegade pack."

"Ther Eagle, then, aire among these hills?"

"Atop ov Dead-Tree, in ambush fer ther Mordaunt train."

Yuba uttered a low whistle.

"Then, while we aire gittin' Jackson Mordaunt out ov Black Feathers's clutches, Death-Eagle an' his band aire gobblin' up ther other party!" he exclaimed.

"No; ef I failed ter return by a sart'in time, Roger Mordaunt war ter halt ther train at a given p'int an' go inter camp thar."

"Ye see, I diskivered Death-Eagle's spies, an' then figgered out his leetle game."

"Ef we push things ter-night, we may be able ter git Mordaunt off an' reach ther train in time fer a hand in ther struggle thar."

"An' ef we kin so manage as ter throw Black Feathers inter contact with ther renegades afore they attack ther train, then our bull party may be able ter slip through ter ther Hidden Hope 'thout breshin' ag'in' ther reds at all!"

Dan Yuba nodded his appreciation.

"Ther trick kin be worked," he averred, positively. "Ef we git Mordaunt out ov ther camp, you an' him cut loose fer ther train. Jest leave me ter ring in ther Kilkenny cats' deal on ther reds."

"But whar be ther train, Pard Pete?"

"D've 'member a leetle motte southeast ov Dead-Tree 'bout five mile?"

"I do, pard; an' ef I 'members right, it's most es strong a p'int es ther Knob itself."

"Perty near, I reckon. Ye will find ther train thar."

CHAPTER XI.

THE PARDS AT WORK.

THE moon was just rising, her rays piercing here and there the deep, dark shadows of the

rocky passes and narrow, wooded valleys, and flooding with a hazy, mellow light the crests of the towering hills, as two forms glided stealthily down into the secluded valley in which lay the camp of Black Feathers and his braves.

Long Pete and Dan Yuba had entered upon their perilous mission.

The pards realized that their incursion was into no sleeping village, into the camp of no careless hunting-party; the man they sought was in the midst of a band of picked warriors, wary and vigilant. Success, if not life itself, trembled in the balance.

Their progress was slow. Every step was made with the greatest caution. At the end of half an hour they had reached a point within a hundred feet of the silent camp. All around them was the dense, black shadow of the overhanging cliff.

Naught marked the camp's location but the smoldering embers of a fire, close in against the foot of the cliff; grouped within the radius of its faint, fitful glow were perhaps a half-score shadowy forms.

Halting, Long Pete and his pard peered forward.

"Kin ye mark ther spot whar Mordaunt lays?" breathed Dan Yuba.

"No; but I kin go es straight ter it es I c'u'd ter thet fire," Long Pete as guardedly replied. "I'll never forget ther lay ov ther camp es I saw it from ther top ov ther cliff."

"Then ye be ready, pard?"

"Ready, Dan!"

A warm clasp of their brave hands, then the pards again stole forward.

Ten paces from the confines of the camp, Yuba's hand fell softly upon his comrade's arm.

Long Pete halted. The dwarfed Hercules glided ahead directly toward the fire.

A moment of breathless suspense—then the sounds of a short, sharp struggle. The motionless forms about the dying fire, startled into a semblance of life, stood with poised heads, striving to locate the ominous sound or awaiting its repetition.

Just a breath—and Long Pete noted by the faint firelight the gleam of a descending blade. A shriek of agony pierced the grim silence, to be swiftly followed by a close imitation of the Apache war-whoop.

Then—utter confusion, a Babel of conflicting sounds; a writhing and twisting of sinewy bodies, a sudden surging forward from all sides; a mocking, disguised yell, a chorus of harsh, fierce cries, and the swift, restless patter of many feet in swift pursuit.

Dan Yuba had gained his end—had thrown the warriors off their guard, the camp into a state of wildest confusion!

Long Pete glided forward. The time for him to act was at hand. A moment sufficed for him to reach the captive—to sever the thongs holding him to the earth.

Jackson Mordaunt gained his feet with difficulty. His uneasy position had cramped his muscles so that, for the nonce, he could scarcely move.

"Stiddy, pard! Slow an' easy, an' we'll slip ther varlets," blurted the giant ranger, drawing him back into the deeper shadows.

"You, Pete?"

"Ya-as, pard; it's me! Dan is ahead, yender. He'll j'ine us at the train."

"Ugh!"

It was the sound Long Pete was expecting yet dreading to hear. The camp was not wholly deserted. One or more of the braves had remained to keep watch over the captives.

Softly-spoken as had been the words of the two men, they had reached the ears of the lurking Apaches.

A struggle was simply inevitable! Flight was out of the question, just then. Mordaunt was so stiff from the effects of the cutting thongs that it was to be doubted if he could move with any degree of celerity: and his consequent awkwardness would do away with the slightest possibility of a stealthy retreat.

Jenkins realized as much.

"Take this, pard; but don't use it 'less ye hev to—it's too noisy," he uttered deftly slipping a revolver into Mordaunt's hand. "An' ef ye kin, an' ye git ther chainece, slip off up the valley. Make fer the top ov ther bluff hyar, an' thar wait."

Hastily uttered as were the words, they were not a breath too soon.

A dark shape seemed to come up out of the earth, almost at the feet of the ranger. At the same instant a ringing whoop stung through the dense gloom, rising high above the occasional sounds floating back from Dan Yuba and his pursuers.

It was the last yell the luckless red-skin ever uttered, for Long Pete sprung upon him with the swiftness of a thunderbolt, with one stroke of his bowie hurling him lifeless to the earth.

A space of perhaps two minutes slipped by in intense silence; then the scout returned to Mordaunt's side.

"We'll git away from hyar," he said, in a whisper scarcely audible. "Likely thar's more ov ther devils in hidin', but we'll hev ter risk runnin' ag'in' 'em."

"I'm all anxiety—lead the way," returned the

rescued miner, in the same cautious undertone used by the scout.

Without further parley or delay, the two men silently left the camp, in a short time gaining the top of the bluff.

Long Pete uttered a breath of relief.

"Keep in the shade, Jackson," he advised, hurriedly. "I'm comin' back in a minute. We've a couple of horses up hyar in the bresh."

With a keen sense of relief Jackson Mordaunt shrunk back into the shadows, his eyes following the receding form of his giant partner.

Sore as he was from his recent rough usage at the hands of the red-skins, he was determined to push forward and reach the wagon-train at as early a moment as possible.

How anxious, how eager, he was to meet Pauline and the others.

Had he not turned his back to his treasure-trove, the Hidden-Hope Mine, at a most critical juncture, to meet them at Dead-Tree Knob?

What a peril he hoped to ward off.

What terrible, what startling and unexpected discoveries he had made within the past three days. Discoveries that he had kept to himself, and would keep to himself.

As he awaited the return of Jenkins, these thoughts and emotions pressed into his very soul.

The scout was not long in reappearing. In addition to his own animal he led that of Dan Yuba. The hoofs of the horses had been so thoroughly muffled that but a slight noise marked Long Pete's approach.

"Mount, Jackson, an' we'll be off," cautiously uttered the scout. "Thar's no tellin' how many ov Black Feathers's gang may be on this hyar spot in the naixt few minutes."

"Very true," Mordaunt assented, clambering stiffly into Dan Yuba's saddle.

"An' I reckon the camp c'u'dn't be stampeded a second time this night," pursued Long Pete, smiling grimly. "It war a pesky slim chainece, but thet Dan Yuba's a sort ov hurricane on skates!"

"Not to mention that prince of bordermen, Long Pete Jenkins," Mordaunt added, with a genial smile, as he proceeded to express his thanks for his timely deliverance.

"But tell me, Pete," he continued, "just how you left the party at Dead-Tree. You cannot imagine how anxious I am to hear everything that is to be said of them."

"Wa-al, but they ain't at ther Knob," slowly avowed Jenkins, half in protest; "but I'll tell ye jest whar they air, an' what I'm doin' hyar."

Mordaunt listened attentively, his bronzed face paling as he learned of the proximity of Death-Eagle, the Merciless, and his band of red outlaws and their evident design.

"I only hope that the scheme you and Dan Yuba have put afoot may succeed—that these warring factions of red devils may wipe each other out of existence," he exclaimed, with terrible earnestness.

"Dick Royale is with the train?"

"No, he is not with it," and again Long Pete went into a detailed statement.

To say that Mordaunt's agitation increased does not do justice to the change in his feelings and aspect. It was as well, perhaps, that the darkness partially concealed his distress.

For something over an hour the two men pushed forward—Long Pete silent and watchful, Mordaunt gloomy and depressed. Then they rode out upon the sloping plain, where the scout dismounted and removed the cloths muffling the hoofs of the horses.

"We kin reach ther motte in a hafe hour or less," he announced, resuming his place in the saddle. "It's about due east ov this p'int."

"The sooner the better," said Mordaunt, briefly.

Nothing further was said for upward of twenty minutes. The motte was plainly visible, and Long Pete had raised his hand to point out the gleaming white covers of the wagons, when a rapid discharge of firearms broke the stillness, driving the color from the scout's face.

"My God! we're too late!" groaned Jackson Mordaunt, in an agony of dismay and anxiety. "Hear those whoops! The Apaches are ahead of us!"

"Stiddy, pard—stiddy!" gritted Long Pete, almost savagely, leaning forward and throwing Mordaunt's horse back upon its haunches. "Don't play the fool—all is not lost!"

CHAPTER XII.

MCBUFF MEETS AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

WHEN Rugg McBuff spurred away from the Mordaunt train, his feelings were such as to be more easily imagined than described.

At the very moment when success had seemed assured—when his plots and schemes seemed fast ripening into a golden usufruct—this one man of a thousand, this Royal Richard, had most unexpectedly put in his appearance, to the utter discomfiture of the plotter!

Nor was that the full bent of the injury inflicted. A bullet from the unerring weapons of the Red-Hand Sport had found a billet in the left forearm of the desperado.

That McBuff was in a rage goes without saying.

To have been foiled was bad enough; but to have been foiled in such a manner!

One man pitted against three, and that one victorious.

Little wonder that consternation speedily gave way to unrestrained rage and chagrin.

"Baffled, but not vanquished!" he gritted, as his good horse bore him onward. "I'll play the game out, if I have to play a lone hand!"

Such was the dogged determination of the scoundrel.

A mile from the train, hidden from the view of the Mordaunt party behind the crest of a swell, he swerved abruptly from his northern course to one almost due west.

It was plain that he did not intend to lose sight of his intended prey. In fact, he was headed directly toward Dead-Tree Knob!

Thanks to treacherous Jose Nalaja, McBuff knew that the eminence would be the camp-ground of the twain that night—perhaps longer.

Already a fresh plot was forming in the evil brain of the schemer.

Within an hour he had reached the sloping northern side of the Knob. Dismounting, he tethered his horse in a bit of chaparral and hastened toward the summit.

He was destined not to reach it, however.

Half way up the gradual slope he was suddenly set upon by a half-dozen Apaches and overpowered and disarmed before he could so much as draw a weapon.

One look into the grim faces of his captors was sufficient to cause his heart to sink. There was nothing in the painted visages but bitter, black hatred—hatred of the most malignant type.

"This is from bad to worse!" was the desperado's thought. "But I'll never say die!"

At a word from their leader, four of the redskins laid hold of McBuff and half-carried, half-dragged him down the slope to the edge of the chaparral, where he was roughly thrown across his horse and securely tied.

Then the squad divided, two turning back to the Knob, while the others pushed toward the foot-hills with the captive.

At the expiration of a half-hour, the latter party found the entrance of a narrow gorge, which shortly debouched into a picturesque basin among the foot-hills.

A snug retreat, with the advantages of wood and water, and succulent grass for a goodly number of horses—advantages that had not been overlooked, as was attested by a single glance from McBuff.

In a word, the basin was the sight of an Apache encampment; or, better, temporary village.

The braves, their lodges, horses, dogs, squaws and other properties and appurtenances were plainly visible.

"My case is probably settled beyond a doubt," McBuff mused as he drank in the scene with gloomy eyes. "The fact is, I've overreached myself. Mordaunt's treasure has slipped between my fingers.

"Why, it'd hustle the Old Boy himself to escape from this infernal den!"

Passing the two sentries at the end of the gorge, the little cavalcade pushed forward across the grassy level, heading for a large central lodge, evidently the quarters of the head chief of the camp.

There the captive and his keepers were greeted with a sort of ovation. It seemed as if the entire population, from the dogs up, came trooping, in a hurly-burly, to the point of interest.

Scarcely had the trio halted, when a flap in the tent was lifted, and the chief strode into view.

A tall, somber-looking savage, lean and sinewy, clad from head to heels in the dress of a cavalryman, with villainy indelibly stamped upon his strong, rugged features.

At sight of the red desperado, McBuff started incredulously; then bent upon his swarthy face a keen, piercing stare.

What a feeling of relief swept over him at that moment!

What an array of dazzling possibilities dawned upon him!

In the chief he recognized an old acquaintance; yes, more—a sworn friend and ally.

"Ho, Death Eagle!" he exclaimed. "You do not know me?"

"I am Lone Star, the man who, joining hands with you and Three Bears, your son, against five cavalrymen, saved both of you from capture, if not death.

"And now I am your captive."

The red chief remained motionless, a peculiar glitter in his small, deep-set orbs, until the captive had finished speaking.

That he recalled the circumstance mentioned, Rugg McBuff did not doubt. The flight of three years could hardly have effaced it from his memory.

Then, to quicken recollection as well as to substantiate his claims, the white outlaw had, while speaking, made with his tightly-pinched hands a sign which he was quite certain his red prototype could not fail to recognize.

"The White Panther, Lone Star, has not been

forgotten," declared the chief of the red cut-throats, reassuringly, in very fair English. "In proof whereof, he is no longer a captive."

Then followed a command in the Apache tongue, whereupon the curious red-skins upon either side fell back a trifle, while the two captors as promptly severed McBuff's bonds and returned his weapons, leaving him at liberty.

"Now, let the White Panther dismount and come into the lodge of Death-Eagle," continued the chief, inclining himself.

"Only too happy to do so, I assure you, chief!" McBuff exclaimed, hastening to accept the invitation.

"In fact, Death-Eagle, of all the men in New Mexico, you are the one I am best pleased to see just now."

"Not better than am I to see the White Panther again," heartily declared the red-skin, with another profound bow, as he extended his hand. "And while you rest and refresh yourself, and your horse is being attended to, I will dispatch a messenger to summon Three Bears."

"Whom I shall be most happy to meet again," McBuff glibly avowed, grasping the proffered hand.

"As will he you."

"But your arm is injured, White Panther?"

"It is, chief."

And as they entered the lodge, McBuff proceeded to give a highly-colored version of the affair at the wagon-train.

Death-Eagle proved an attentive listener.

"It is the same train my scouts have had under surveillance during the past twenty-four hours," he promptly avowed, at the conclusion of McBuff's narrative. "In fact, I may say that we shall capture it to-night."

At this bit of information Rugg McBuff's face expressed anything but satisfaction.

Affairs were going from bad to worse, with a vengeance!

Once let the Mordaunt party fall into the clutches of the merciless Apaches, and his hopes of extorting a golden ransom would fall never to rise!

"Death-Eagle!"

"I am hearkening, White Panther!"

"We are friends?"

"More, we are allies, if you say."

"Good! That would, indeed, give me power."

"But listen, chief. Do you recall the promise made by yourself and Three Bears?"

"Death-Eagle mutely inclined his head. The action hid the peculiar light glinting in his dark eyes. His crafty mind divined what was coming.

"I do not forget it, White Panther, and I am ready to abide by that promise."

"What is it you have to ask?" and with the question he lifted his head, so that his eyes flamed full upon the face of the desperado.

"Rugg McBuff hesitated not an instant.

"I ask—nay—demand—the lives of the two girls with that train! The others you may do with as you will! Life for life is all I claim!"

"Now, what say you, chief?"

For a moment the red-skin sat as silent, as motionless, as so much rock. Then he bent forward, in a low tone saying:

"It shall be as White Panther wishes. The lives of the girls shall be spared. I will send a swift runner to the ambuscade, saying they are to be taken alive and uninjured; but the others—Red Knife, the guide, the two white men, the two Greasers, and the three blackmen—they must all die!"

McBuff gnawed savagely at his nether lip, to suppress an oath. His heart filled to overflowing with bitter, black rage. He was not blinded by the shallow tactics adopted by Death-Eagle.

The wily chief would make a pretense of keeping his promise, while in reality carrying out his original plans in regard to the girls! Due care would be taken that they never left the Apache camp!

Curbing his anger, with consummate address checking out every trace of suspicion or mistrust, the desperado expressed himself as under weighty obligation for the consideration shown; for well he knew that a slip of the tongue, a trifling lapse of caution, just then, would cost him no end of trouble, if not eventually his life.

In dissimulation, in a speedy departure from the camp, lay his only hope; and it is but fair to say that he played most adroitly his difficult part.

Just at nightfall, he rode forth from the retreat of Death-Eagle, bent upon seeking the Mordaunt train and making a bold final effort to attain his end.

"It is my last stroke, and I will succeed or die!" he muttered, in a slow, determined way. "If I fail, I will be a man, at last, and step between my beautiful Pauline and the fate plotted for her."

"I will tell her of this strange, new love that has taken such deep root in my heart—this fierce, selfish passion; if she scorns me, then will I put her face to face with the truth, and throw myself between her and the evil genius, even though it cost me my life!"

CHAPTER XIII.

BIG DALE'S SUSPICIONS.

"THE lead went plum' center, by thunder!"

The speaker, a burly, broad-shouldered plainsman, stood in the midst of the prairie, beside the lifeless forms of the victims of the Red-Hand Sport's deadly aim, Jose Nalaja and Pedro Carmenta, Roger Mordaunt's treacherous employees.

Beside him was a second personage—his junior by full twenty years: a tall, handsome fellow, of good form and with clear-cut features, brown eyes and hair, golden-red mustaches, sound white teeth and a fair complexion.

Both men were travel-stained, wore the garb of the plains, and were well armed and splendidly mounted, as could have been attested by a glance at their weapons and their horses.

The two were Big Dale, Long Pete's prairie pard, and Richard Royale, Pauline Mordaunt's betrothed.

"Dick, thar's a riddle hyar I can't solve at first sight, pursued the older of the two, turning upon his companion a glance fraught with mystification. "We kin see tha' hes bin red work done, an' that Mordaunt's party war ther ones ter suffer; fer these hyar Greasers war in his employ. Pete Jenkins an' myself hired 'em."

"Indians, Dale?"

"Nary a red-skin!" promptly declared Big Dale, with a very decided toss of his grizzled head. "Thar ain't ther fu'st sign ov 'Pache in this—tho' we've see'd sign enough ov ther varlets ter know they're hangin' round ther train.

"No, sir-ee! 'Tain't *that*! Tell ye, w'ot, Dick Royale, I'm goin' ter look inter this hyar wrinkle a leetle ways, ef we don't reach ther Knob fer a week—ye hear me! Jes' hol' on ter ther hosses a bit!"

And without awaiting so much as a murmur of protestation or approval, the big plainsman began his self-appointed task.

Five—ten—fifteen minutes slipped by; then he returned from his patient circling.

"What luck?"

Again he tossed his head, and an expression, tantamount to disgust, crept into his bearded face.

"Derned leetle, boyee—*derned* leetle!" he replied. "All that kin be made out in ther gloom aire tha' two horsemen jined ther train at this p'int—one comin' from ther south, t'other from ther sou'east.

"Somethin' happened, an' then they both rode away, one arter ther other, while Mordaunt and his party pulled ahead.

"*That* aire 'bout all I kin make out ov it jest now."

Dick Royale had listened with interest almost painful.

"Could—could Pau—the girls, I mean—have been abducted?" he ventured to ask.

"In course they c'u'd!" was the almost savage reply. "But, mind ye, I ain't sayin' they war!"

"It war a derned fool trick, it war, on Mordaunt's part, ter hev them gals undertake this hyer trip 'crost these plains—an' I don't keev ef I say it! Reckon I told *him* es much, es also did Pete Jenkins an' Dan Yuba! Why, pard, it's resky enough fer men w'ot aire thoroughbred Injun-fighters, so overrun with 'Paches an' outlaws aire this hyar same bit ov kentry."

"But he allowed es how they c'u'd do it, with ther help ov Pete an' you an' me, i'th himself an' Dan Yuba ter back us up from Dead-Tree Knob ter ther Hidden Hope—an' tha' war no crowdin' reason inter his *cabeza*!"

"But perhaps things were not in such a turmoil at that time," suggested Royale, mildly.

"Wa-al, they warn't quite so bad, that's a fact," admitted Dale, with a semblance of reluctance. "But it's a mighty onsart'in bit ov kentry, an' my advice, ter gals an' people havin' a horror ov bal'headedness, aire ter stay away till arter Uncle Sam gits a chaine ter sorter take ther wire-aidge off ov things."

"Good advice, I should say," Royale remarked. "But then, Dale, I suppose Mordaunt counted you and Jenkins a host in yourselves."

"W'ich he hadn't orter!" retorted the plainsman, as he swung into the saddle. "In course, Pete an' me u'd do all we c'u'd; but ef it sh'u'd come ter ther wu'st, w'ot c'u'd we do?"

"You at least would not desert the girls."

A sound, little short of a maddened roar, escaped the Hercules.

"Desart ther gals!" he repeated, in tones of thunder. "See hyar, young feller, do ye know me—me? Sa-ay! see tha' ar right arm?—ye

might tear it from ther socket, a thousandth part of an inch at a time, afore Dale Keith'd turn his back ter a female in distress, be she Jackson Mordaunt's darter or ther child ov ther po'rest squatter in all Arkansaw! D'y'e heur?—tha' me! An' Pete Jenkins aire out ov ther same lot!"

Royale nodded crisply, saying:

"Exactly! And placing just such an estimate upon you, Mordaunt thought it would be safe for his daughter and her cousin to undertake the trip to the Hidden-Hope Mine.

"Shake, old man—I am proud to know you!"

Frank and hearty as were the words, the big borderman complied with anything but grace.

Somehow, in an indefinable way, he felt dis-

pointed in the man who was to wed his partner's daughter.

Not that there was anything visibly wrong about Richard Royale; on the contrary, he seemed a frank, honest, out-spoken fellow, handsome enough, an agreeable companion, and by no means lacking in courage.

No, it was upon no visible point that Big Dale could base the feelings which impelled him, from time to time, and almost unconsciously, to watch Royale from the corners of his eyes.

But the master did not end with that furtive, distrustful surveillance; from first to last the plainsman had been as gruff and cross as the proverbial bear with the sore head.

And with it all, he had no definite idea as to the real cause of his irritability! He simply knew that he was "cross," and distrustful of everything and everybody—something decidedly unusual with him, for among his friends his open, unsuspicious good nature had almost passed into proverb.

On the other hand, Royale had kept in the best of spirits, with but a single anxiety to reach the train as soon as possible.

If he noticed the peculiar behavior of his guide at all, he had attributed it to but little significance; it was probably a component part of the man's character, and, for the sake of comparative harmony, must be overlooked.

Such would have been the verdict founded upon Royale's bearing upon the cloak with which he shielded his real feelings.

In reality, he was the prey of a terrible, a wearing anxiety.

A score times had he been tempted to drive a knife hilt-deep in the broad back of the guide, for he feared and hated him.

He had become cognizant of the fact that Big Dale was secretly watching him, and the grim truth sent terror to his very soul.

What did the burly giant suspect?

Something of no small moment, or his actions belied his thoughts!

Riding forward as rapidly as the jaded condition of their horses would permit, the two men reached the crest of a swell, just as the moon swept slowly into view above the eastern horizon.

"We are still on ther Mordaunt trail," remarked Big Dale, after a moment's observation. "Reckon another hour'll kerry us 'longside ov 'em at the Knob."

"Welcome intelligence, I assure you! 'Hope de—'"

The sibilant twang of a bowstring sounded not twenty paces away, and a feathered shaft hurtled directly between the two men.

"'Paches! by the host ov Israel!" ejaculated Big Dale, springing from the saddle. "Down, pard!—they're all 'round us, but not a one in sight!"

Prompt as had been the action of the borderer, that of Richard Royal was by no means discounted; for, uttering a yell of defiance, he struck spurs to his horse and rode away at a break-neck pace, heading straight for Dead-Tree Knob!

"Ther derned fool!" gritted Big Dale, aloud, for the moment oblivious of his surroundings, as he stared blankly at the blurred forms of the rapidly receding horse and its rider. "Dern him, I say! Does be want ter draw ther hull red pack onto ther Mordaunt camp?"

Then, in cautious, yet earnest strains, as if in answer to the query, came the words:

"Better a score red-skins than that viper!"

Throwing his trusty revolvers to a level, the borderer wheeled as if electrified.

Facing him, a dozen paces distant, stood a man, a dashing, sportive-looking fellow, his arms folded carelessly across his broad breast.

CHAPTER XIV.

CERTAIN SUSPICIONS CONFIRMED.

An expression tantamount to unqualified amazement took possession of the bluff, honest face of Big Dale, the borderman, as his eyes fell upon the stranger, who had arisen from the midst of the plain as silently and unexpectedly as an apparition—an expression quickly giving way to one of suspicion.

His thoughts did not interfere with the use of his tongue, however, for he promptly demanded:

"Be ye friend or foe? Quick, stranger—I'm kinder narvous in ther fingers ter-night, an' so'thin' might happen, ef yer tonge ain't in good runnin' order!"

The unknown nodded crisply.

"You've got the 'drop' on me, sure enough, pardner, and I reckon you could salt my meat just as easy as not," he exclaimed, with manifest good-nature. "But there isn't the slightest cause for a ruction, so put up your weapons and I'll advance."

"If you are a friend to the Mordaunts, there should be no bad blood between us."

Big Dale started.

"Ye speak ov ther Mordaunts. W'ot know ye ov them?" he asked, with visibly increasing suspicion.

"Next to nothing, yet enough to have made me their friend. I will explain it all presently."

"An' how may I call yer name?"

"You might call it anything, from A to Iz—"

zard, and I'd answer; but generally it's plain, common, everyday Dick Brazzleton.

"Yours, I believe, is Dale Keith—Big Dale?"

The borderman nodded shortly, saying:

"Ye hev it right, pardner, an' I puts up my we'pins."

"Now, let me advise ye ter git under kiver ov sum sort. Thar's a hull passel ov red-rinds in easy reach ov ye."

Brazzleton uttered a laugh.

"You are wrong there, my friend," he exclaimed, lightly. "There isn't an Apache within a mile of us!"

"Oh, thar ain't, eh?"

"No, there isn't," reiterated Brazzleton. "In fact, I may say there isn't one within three times the distance I mentioned!"

A grunt expressed the borderman's incredulity.

"Wal, I hope ye aire right," he averred, "but it 'pears ter me that I hev purty good proof that ye don't know jest w'ot ye're talkin' about!"

"You were fired upon?"

"Ye hev called ther turn, pardner."

"An arrow?"

"Ye-as, an arrow."

"I fired it!"

"You!"

"So I said. See—here is something in proof," and Brazzleton held up a bow.

Big Dale stared hard through the moonlight at the mysterious stranger.

"Pardner!" he ejaculated, "I'm 'bout ready ter cave on ther Injun question; but may I be painted fer a Piute, ef I w'u'dn't like ter heur ye cl'ar yer record a bit! I jest w'u'd, now!"

Brazzleton advanced, followed by his horse, which, at a word from him, arose from the rank grass.

"An' fu'st ov all, I'd like ter heur why ye fired at us," pursued Big Dale. "In course, ye hed a reason—most likely a powerful good one!"

"I did, indeed," readily affirmed Brazzleton. "And I attained my end, too, for it was my desire to separate you from your companion."

"Ter git me away from Royale, say ye?"

"No; for your companion was not Richard Royale, but one Oscar Monshall—a gambler, an unscrupulous adventurer!"

Big Dale was fairly staggered by this declaration.

"Not Dick Royale, eh?" he muttered, half-audibly, as he passed his hand over his brow in a perplexed sort of way.

A moment he stood thus; then his face settled into an expression of conviction, not unmixed with exuberance. With outstretched hands he sprung forward crying:

"Shake, pardner! I'd rather meet ye than a long-lost brother! Ef ye ain't jest ther—Say it ag'in, pardner! Ther dirty cuss wa'n't Dick Royale?"

"No more than you are!" avowed Brazzleton, submitting his slender white hands to the broad palms almost appealingly extended. "And the fellow is a 'dirty cuss'—as mean a galoot as ever walked!"

"Let me tell you right here, too, that Royale is dead—murdered by Monshall and his pal, one Dave Danton!"

The borderman drew back, as if hard hit, dropping the hands he had so eagerly grasped and staring straight into the cold, impassive face of Brazzleton.

"Dead!" he ejaculated, hoarsely. "Dead! My God! Sich news'll kill my pardner's darter!"

"It is bitter, black work, from beginning to end," vouchsafed Brazzleton, after a moment of profound silence. "And I assure you that I would willingly give up life itself to raise up my friend—to restore to the unfortunate lady her plighted lover."

"That being altogether out of question, I have taken the trail, and will run the murderous hounds to their doom at a rope's end, or die fac-ing them!"

"Ye war Royale's pard?"

"Yes, for the past three years."

"Pard, I'm with ye! An' ye kin count on Big Dale Keith till ther crack ov doom!" cried the borderman, impulsively, again catching the strong white hands and looking straight into Brazzleton's darkly-glowing eyes. "You avenge yer pardner—I strike fer Pauline Mordaunt!"

"Good! We're pards to the end of the trail," Brazzleton exclaimed, in return. "But listen, for I don't want to hold you here a minute longer than is necessary."

"To a complete understanding, it is necessary to go back to the origin of Monshall's unscrupulous scheme."

"As you probably know, Dick Royale was a detective. For months prior to his death we had been engaged in trailing down a band of dangerous counterfeiters, the trail finally leading us down into Elephant Lode, a gold-camp in Southwestern Colorado."

"There we located our men, and were ready to insinuate the entire outfit, when Royale, to his intense horror, discovered that the arch-spirit of the band was his nearest living relative—a first cousin."

Big Dale nodded quickly, saying:

"Ah, that cousin war this hyar same Monshall?"

"Exactly! All that followed need not be detailed at present. Suffice it that I dropped into the background for the time being, we having determined to see if the fellow was possessed of a single redeeming trait, with a view to giving him a chance to clear his record."

"An' givin' him that chancce cost Royale his life?"

"In a nutshell, yes."

"But the villainy of the wretch did not find a surfeit there. In some manner he obtained an inkling of the intended movements of the Mordaunts, and of the fact that Royale was to join them hereabouts, and, as I have learned since I have been on the trail, he at once determined to step into Royale's shoes."

"Associated with Monshall in the murder of Royale, and in the evil scheme subsequently put afoot, was a second rascal, fully as dangerous, known as Desperate Dave."

"Shortly after leaving Colorado, the two separated, not only to facilitate the working of their wicked plot, but to retard or baffle pursuit."

"Little good did it do them. Through thick and thin I have followed Danton, to baffle him in the very moment of his triumph, as I shall baffle Monshall."

"From the first, my unalterable purpose has been to give them full sway until the final moment—the moment when a complete and dazzling realization of their hopes is just before them—then to strike, as a thunderbolt from a clear sky!"

"A score of times could I have captured or slain them both; but such a course would have robbed my vengeance of half its sting!"

In low intense strains had Dick Brazzleton spoken, and his words stirred Big Dale Keith to his very soul.

"Good enough, pardner!" he cried, with glistening eyes, as the handsome Nemesis paused for a moment. "I see yer drift—sink yer shaft home!"

Brazzleton merely nodded, then resumed:

"I had calculated to play a lone hand, too, to the very end; but to-day I made a discovery that has caused me to amend my programme—to seek a trusty ally."

"Ye left two dead Greasers on ther plain, back thar?" interjected Big Dale, significantly.

"Yes; Danton, faithless to his pal, attempted to take the game into his own hands, bribing the two Mexicans to drug the negroes and assist him in capturing Mordaunt and the girls."

"The scheme worked like a charm, up to a certain point, for when I arrived at the train, Danton had full possession; but fortune favored me in the struggle that followed, and, as a result, Mordaunt and his party moved forward, leaving the Greasers dead in the field and Danton in full flight.

"I pursued the scoundrel, determined to capture him, in order that some of the mystery shrouding the fate of Dick Royale might be cleared up."

"Fate was against me, however, for the fellow rode straight into an Indian ambush on the top of a knob some miles to the northwest, was taken captive, and carried to the camp of the red-skins back in the foot-hills, where he at once was released, being, apparently, on a friendly footing with the head chief of the party."

"That put a new phase to the affair; for, with Danton on one hand, ready and willing to utilize the presence of the Apaches, and Monshall approaching on the other, I saw that I must seek help."

"And as I was not yet ready to make a plain statement of the case to Mordaunt, it occurred to me to intercept you."

"I am with you, pardner!" promptly avowed Big Dale, clinching his hands savagely. "Map out yer trail, an' I'll stick by it ter ther end—ef I kin keep my fingers off ther varlet's throat!"

"From ther fu'st glimpse I got ov him, I spected crooked work sumwhar! But w'ot c'u'd I do? Nothin'! Keepin' mum an' watchin' war es fur es I c'u'd go!"

A peculiar smile wreathed Brazzleton's red lips—a lurid sparkle kindled in his dark eyes.

"You'll do, pardner!" he cried, clasping Big Dale's hands. "Continue to keep mum and to watch—breathe not a word of suspicion, but shadow Monshall's every move, and—we'll win!"

"I am going back to the Apache camp, to keep an eye on Danton's movements. In his present company, he needs watching more than ever."

"As soon as it is possible, I will again see you. Don't make a decisive move, unless Monshall attempts to crowd his game!"

"Trust me fer that!" gritted Big Dale. "Ef he crowds too close, his purty white neck'll crack!"

"So-long, then, and may luck go with you!" Brazzleton exclaimed, springing into the saddle.

A chirrup to his horse, a jangle of his long spurs, and he dashed away, heading almost north.

Big Dale gazed after him long and earnestly, with visible admiration.

"Durn me, ef he ain't a good one—ther clean,

white stuff, an' no mistake!" he ejaculated, as he turned to his waiting steed.

"Now, I'll jest ride up an' putt my peepers on this hyar bogus Dick Royale—an' keep 'em thar! A skunk's a skunk, an' it's hard fer ther critter ter pass fer anything else. I knew thar war one about, but he war under kiver so deep I c'u'dn't jest place him."

And thus communing with himself, the borderman mounted and rode rapidly across the plain, in the bright moonlight following the Mordaunt trail as easily as by day.

One, two, three miles were quickly covered. Then a revolver cracked sharply in the tall grass a few paces south of the trail, and with a ringing cry of agony Big Dale flung up his hands and fell from his horse, stricken down by the hand of an assassin!

CHAPTER XV.

A SERIOUS SITUATION.

"Now that we have been ridded of McBuff and his allies, I presume, Uncle Roger, that our first step will be to bring the darkies to their senses," suggested Pauline Mordaunt, as the trio, having watched their deliverer, the Red-Hand Sport, out of sight, turned toward the wagons.

"Assuredly, my dear; and we shall begin operations in that direction at once, if you and Nellie feel that you are sufficiently recovered from the effects of the late campaign," Roger Mordaunt returned, assuming a cheeriness he was far from feeling.

"I am ready for any measure necessary to our safety," avowed Nellie.

"As am I," declared Pauline. "In fact, Uncle Roger, I am only fairly aroused."

Mordaunt bestowed upon his fair kinswoman a fond, lingering look. A suspicious moisture dimmed the brightness of his gray eyes, as he turned his gaze upon the surrounding plain.

"You're a brave girl, Paullie," he said, softly. "You are a true Mordaunt."

"But I am hopeful that the worst is over—that neither of you will be put to a further test. Jenkins should be back within an hour, and then we shall know exactly what to expect."

"But, papa, suppose Mr. Jenkins should be delayed, or should fall into the hands of the Apaches—what then?" asked Nellie, her face suddenly clouding.

"That is a disquieting thought," Mordaunt replied. "But Mr. Jenkins was thoughtful enough to provide for just such an emergency. In such an event, we are to halt and go into camp for the night at a motte, or timber island, some five miles this side of Dead-Tree Knob. When morning comes, if he has not returned, we are to send a scout ahead to the Knob, to ascertain the exact state of affairs at that point.

"Should the place have been invested by the Indians, we are to fortify our position at the motte as strongly as possible and at once dispatch a runner to the Hidden Hope Mine for reinforcements."

Pauline's heart sunk. She could not accept her uncle's seemingly hopeful view of the situation. Without most cogent reasons, Long Pete could not have given such instructions.

Then, too, she felt that Roger Mordaunt knew more than he cared to disclose just then.

A gloomy silence came over the little party.

Arrived at the wagon in which the three negroes lay unconscious, the work of resuscitation was at once begun.

A tedious task it proved, for the blacks had been heavily dosed with a powerful soporific, producing deep, deathlike sleep.

Snowflake was the first to show signs of returning animation, suddenly rising to a sitting posture and staring around after the manner of one thoroughly bewildered.

"Mars' Morda'nt!"

"Well, 'Flake?"

"Whar dat Pedro?"

"Why do you ask?"

The negro clinched his broad hands savagely.

"I jess gwine ter kill de yaller rascal, dat why!" he gritted. "Le' me out ob de wagon!"

"Easy, 'Flake. Why should you kill the man?"

"Fore de Lawd! he desarve it, I reckon!" Then, sinking his voice to a mysterious whisper, he continued: "Look heah, Mars' Morda'nt, dem Greaser debbils drug us niggers dat dey might kerry off de young misses. Dat a fack, now. Dey gib us de drug in whisky, den laugh an' talk how dey leab de sign fo' de boss to kem an' git de gals. I heerd 'em, but I c'u'dn't move."

"Jess let me git out, fo' I gwine ter kill dat Pedro, den Jose."

"They are dead," said Mordaunt, quietly, and he then narrated what had happened, to the unbounded amazement of his faithful servitor.

"Et serve 'em jess right, an' sabe me a heap ob trubble, I 'spect," was Snowflake's only comment.

When the two others had been revived and the situation made known to all, each was assigned a wagon and team, 'Flake having charge of the rearmost.

Mordaunt and the two girls then remounted and rode forward at the head of the little train.

"We may count ourselves extremely fortunate," Mordaunt observed. "McBuff had laid his plans most cunningly, and the escape of Jose placed our efforts at naught. I should have tied the scoundrel to the wagon. It was a glaring oversight, leaving him foot-loose."

"An oversight that would have proved fatal to us but for the opportune arrival of that daring stranger," said Pauline.

"Royal Richard," Nellie murmured, half aloud. "With a little more than a simple transposition, it becomes Richard Royale. Singular, isn't it?"

Roger Mordaunt started, glancing quickly at Pauline.

"It is, indeed, singular," he returned, his hopes visibly excited. "Could it have been Royale mas—"

"Utterly out of the question!" Pauline quietly interposed. "Trust me to recognize Dick among ten thousand!"

Nellie looked keenly at the face of her fair cousin, and as she noted its fine expression a sound akin to a breath of relief fluttered from her lips.

Faint as it was, it did not wholly escape Pauline.

"At any rate, he seemed possessed of considerable knowledge concerning Rugg McBuff," pursued Nellie, coloring vividly as she caught a glance from Pauline. "He addressed him as David Danton—Desperate Dave."

"Doubtless, the wretch is as well fixed as to names as was the fabled cat with lives," suggested Roger Mordaunt.

"But, be that as it may, I can't rid myself of the impression that we have not seen the last of our deliverer—that he is, in some mystic, intangible way, connected with Royale."

"And, in any event, we owe him far more than we shall likely ever be able to return."

"I agree with you there," avowed Pauline, and then the conversation drifted into other channels.

The afternoon slowly wore away, the approach of night bringing with it a feeling akin to dread.

So lame had the horses become that the motte was not reached until long after the sun had disappeared beyond the hills to the westward.

The most fruitful source of alarm, however, was the continued absence of Long Pete Jenkins.

Even Roger Mordaunt was forced to admit that the situation was one of extreme gravity.

That the Apaches would attack the train during the night, was more than probable; it was almost an assured fact.

All that could be done, however, was to follow implicitly the instructions Long Pete had given.

Accordingly, the three wagons were drawn up in the form of a triangle, the horses securely picketed, and sentries posted, while the girls began preparations for supper.

An old soldier, Roger Mordaunt held firmly to the belief that one man well fed was worth two with their vital forces weakened by hunger.

About an acre in extent, the motte occupied the crest of a slight elevation, the southern end of which was formed by the overhanging bank of a narrow, but deep and sluggish stream—at once providing water for the party and preventing an approach from that quarter. The three other sides sloped gradually downward from the edge of the timber to the level of the plain.

Snowflake was posted at the northern edge of the motte, another negro at the eastern extremity, and the third just within the border to the westward.

When Mordaunt and the girls had finished their supper, they relieved the negroes for half an hour, both Pauline and Nellie insisting on sharing the guard duty.

This led to a further consideration of the question, and it was decided to divide the night into two watches—Mordaunt and the girls taking the first, he and the three negroes the second and more perilous.

Accordingly, Roger Mordaunt assumed Snowflake's position, while Pauline and Nellie went to the west and east, respectively. Each was well armed, carrying, in addition to a pair of revolvers, a fine repeating rifle.

It was not without a tremor that Pauline took up her beat, extending from the verge of the steep creek-bank to a point near the northern border of the motte. It was a peculiarly trying ordeal, one worthy a Spartan maid.

But the camp must be guarded, and the negroes were not to be wholly trusted, just yet; for it was only too evident that they had not fully recovered from the effects of the drug administered by the two Mexicans, Jose Nalaja and Pedro Carmenta.

Then, too, it served to turn her thoughts into an entirely new channel. For a time, she ceased to brood over the non-appearance of her plighted lover and to conjure up scenes of peril wherein her father was the central figure.

Her thoughts were of the grim present.

Steadily, she walked back and forth, while the moon crept higher and higher in the heavens, its hazy yellow rays investing the night with a weird, mystic charm—a charm not in human nature to withstand.

So Pauline paced slowly to and fro, gradually forgetting the environing danger, becoming only dreamily conscious of her real purpose there.

Thus two hours slipped by unheeded.

Then came the awakening.

A shadow fell athwart her path.

Confronting her, his finger upon his lips to enjoin silence, stood Rugg McBuff!

CHAPTER XVI.

AN INTERRUPTED REVELATION.

PAULINE MORDAUNT recoiled sharply, her gray eyes filling with a light akin to terror, her face blanching to an ashy pallor.

Just an instant thus: then the glow in her clear orbs changed to the fiery sparkle of anger, while the red tide of intense indignation swept aside the pallor of throat and cheek.

"Villain! go your way! Do not attempt to molest me!" she exclaimed, drawing a small revolver and slowly retreating until her back was against the tree. "This cowardly persecution must cease, now and here!"

"Girl—"

"Not another step, if you would live, Rugg McBuff!"

Clear, cold and hard, as if from lips of ice, the words rung forth, and McBuff shrunk back a pace, a pained look on his dark, handsome visage.

"Miss Mordaunt listen!" he exclaimed, calmly folding his arms across his superb chest. "Believe me, I mean to do you no harm, even by word or look! I am here to save you!"

"To save me?" repeated Pauline, scornfully.

"You save me? From what, pray?"

"From a fate a hundred-fold worse than death!" was the earnest reply. "In the light of past events, it may seem incredible; but I swear, before the Great Judge of all men, that it is so!"

"Listen: The train will be attacked to-night and destroyed. A strong force of renegade Apaches, led by old Death-Eagle, the Merciless, will surround the motte, creeping closer and closer in the tall grass of the prairie. When they strike, not a man will be spared. Roger Mordaunt's outfit will be blotted from the face of the earth. You and your fair cousin will be carried away to endure a life-long captivity among the merciless red outlaws."

The color had gradually faded from Pauline's face, and now a choking, gasping sort of outcry followed the words as an echo. She reeled, and would have fallen but for the friendly tree at her back.

Yet, her dread of Rugg McBuff remained; the muzzle of her weapon did not swerve.

A moment; then her trepidation vanished. It was as if the peculiar expression mantling the eager, handsome countenance of the desperado had acted as a tonic on her nerves.

"Why do you tell me this—you, who, perhaps, have prompted Death-Eagle to leave his mountain haunts to make the attack?" she demanded almost fiercely, her gray eyes sparkling vividly, the pallor creeping over her beautiful face deepening to a hue almost deathlike. "Is it a taunt—a part of your wicked revenge?"

"Pauline, you wrong me!" McBuff protested, a slight quiver noticeable in his voice. "Believe me, I have nothing to do with Death-Eagle's contemplated attack. It is only by the merest chance that I am here—here in a position to help you, to do good once instead of evil."

"Years ago it lay in my power to save the life of Death-Eagle and his son, Three Bears, and I did it—more's the pity! Since that time the chief has been outlawed from his tribe; he and his followers are to-day Ishmaelites, without friends, white or red, and a meeker gang of cut-throats never went unhung."

"This afternoon I fell into their clutches. Death would have been my lot but for the chief, who ordered my release and welcomed me to his camp."

"There I learned that your party was to be attacked to-night—that they had singled out your probable camp-ground and were lying in ambush there."

"I then demanded of the chief life for life. He made a pretense of acceding to the demand, promising that yourself and your cousin should be spared, but in reality not altering in the slightest his original design—to place you both in life-long captivity."

"So, when night came, I left the Apache camp, determined to seek you and put you on your guard—to save you from certain doom, if you would accept the service at my hands."

"For all of which I am deeply grateful," said Pauline, slowly and deliberately.

"It is not strange that you should doubt me," McBuff resumed, fancying he could detect just a strain of sarcasm in the girl's even tones. "I have done enough to merit far more than mere suspicion, and yet it was done blindly, madly."

"The story is too long for this time and this place; let it suffice, just now, that your father's gold was the magnet that drew me on—up to a certain stage."

"Then I became possessed of a wilder, more alluring, *ignis-fatius* sort of hope—a hope that might well have tempted me to destruction."

Have you an idea what it was, Miss Mordaunt—Pauline?"

The girl drew back just a trifle. There was a glow in the dark eyes of the desperado she was not pleased to note.

"As we are utter strangers, Rugg McBuff, it is not to be expected that I should have any knowledge of the motives governing your actions," she replied, coldly.

"Only too true, Miss Mordaunt!" and the desperado inclined himself with great humility, real or assumed. "But I had hoped that you might see fit to make my way in the task before me not altogether one of thorns."

"I have sought you out to make a clean breast of it, and now I must speak plainly, even at the risk of appearing brutal."

"In a word, Miss Mordaunt, I loved you—shall always love you!" and McBuff's voice grew faint and tremulous with emotion. "If—"

"Enough!" Pauline sternly interrupted. "You forget yourself! I shall hear no more. Go!"

The words stung Rugg McBuff to the quick. The semblance of weakness vanished. With flashing eyes he drew himself proudly erect.

"Do not make a mistake, Miss Mordaunt!" he protested, coldly. "I am not here to insult you, but to perform a duty—a duty to which I have awakened only too tardily."

"*You are overshadowed by a great peril—a peril beside which the Apaches fade into insignificance!*"

Pauline vouchsafed not a word in response. She simply stared at McBuff with eyes expressive of distrust and incredulity. She had no fear of the desperado; her revolver covered him and she was an expert in the use of the weapon.

"And the worst feature of it all is that I have helped to create that peril," pursued McBuff, after a moment of intense silence. "In fact, I may say that I was one of the principals of the wicked scheme."

A scornful smile appeared on the white face of the girl.

"That, at least, is worthy of credence," she observed.

Again McBuff inclined himself.

"I am happy to know that you are willing to credit at least a portion of my statement!" he exclaimed, bitterly.

"But, irksome to you as is this interview, I trust for your own sake you will hear me out."

"I have sought you here to clear my record so far as you are concerned, to point out the pitfall I have helped to dig in your path."

"Will you hear me?"

"Proceed!"

McBuff bowed his thanks, then in a slow, steady tone—a tone betraying calmness at the cost of bitter effort—began his revelation, saying:

"I am known as David Danton, a gambler and a desperado. It is not the name handed down from father to son in by-gone generations of my family; but it will answer here, and better, perhaps, than the genuine article, inasmuch as it was under that title that I became involved in the merciless plot to accomplish your destruction."

"For some months past I have been closely associated with a bird of the same feather, known as Oscar Monshaw, or 'The Parson,' but whose real name is Reuben Harpy."

Pauline started.

"Reuben Harpy!" she exclaimed, the pupils of her eyes dilating. "Pray go on!"

"Our relative positions, may be summed up very briefly," continued Danton, as the desperado may better be called. "He was the superior villain, and where he led I followed—a sort of flunky, or henchman!" and he smiled bitterly.

"Well, we were engaged in a line of business not strictly in accordance with the rules and regulations laid down by Uncle Sam in his code, and, as a natural result, we became much sought after; in brief, we hounded from place to place by detectives."

"It was during one of these forced marches, just as we were entering the gold-camp of Elephant Lode, Colorado, that Harpy picked up a letter addressed to 'Richard Royale, Saguache, Colorado,' and which seemed never to have been opened."

"That letter, Miss Mordaunt, had been written by you, and inclosed was a lengthy communication from your father, dated in the Mimbres on the 2d of March."

Pauline uttered a quick gasp of surprise. It was as if a flood of light had been turned upon the strange occurrences of the past week.

"Go on—go on!" she exclaimed, huskily, trembling with a vague, indefinable fear. "Tell me the worst, and have done with it!"

"It is told only too soon, Pauline," said Danton, clinching his hands as if steeling himself for a crucial ordeal. "Bitter black work followed—and that I now would give half my life to undo!"

"We were hard pushed and almost penniless. Learning that Royale was in the camp, and flush, we determined to relieve him of his money, by fair means or foul. The fact that he was Harry's cousin had no weight in the matter—unless it was to simplify it."

"Let it suffice that we accomplished our end,

only to discover at the eleventh hour that Royale was a detective, the leader of the men upon our trail, and that he had—as I have since learned—given Harpy due time and opportunity to clear his skirts!

"But, not content with having robbed his cousin, Harpy was no sooner clear of the camp than he began a yet deeper and more devilish plot—the plot against you, basing his projected operations upon the information contained in the letter so singularly intercepted.

"Richard Royale—"

"Is here, scoundrel!" interpolated a clear, ringing voice, and forth from the black shadows beyond Pauline strode a tall, handsome man, his dark eyes fairly ablaze, his hands closed firmly around the polished butts of his revolvers.

With a single swift, startled glance at the strange, yet familiar face of her avowed lover, Pauline Mordaunt took one step forward, then with a wild cry sunk back in a dead faint—to be clasped in a pair of brawny, outstretched arms!

"Waugh!"

That one guttural ejaculation, then up from the waving grass of the plain sprung a score of painted Apaches, with whoop and yell charging straight upon Richard Royale and his foe!

CHAPTER XVII.

AFFAIRS IN THE TIMBER.

A MEDLEY of sounds—a piercing shriek, a burst of war-whoops and a rapid crashing of firearms—apprised Roger Mordaunt and his daughter that the dreaded moment was at hand—that the Apaches had at last appeared.

Both hurried toward the wagons, Nellie gaining their shelter a trifle in advance of her father.

Mordaunt was met by Snowflake, looking wild and startled, and gripping a revolver in each hand.

"Whar Missy Pauline?" cried the negro, his voice rising shrilly above the din at the edge of the motte.

Roger Mordaunt staggered back. His worst suspicions were in a fair way to be verified.

"Is she not here?" she demanded, hoarsely. "Speak quickly, man—her life may depend upon it!"

"No; Missy Nellie come, but not Pauline!"

"Quick, now—ye'se'f, Mars' Mordaunt! Git inside dar an' keep dem boys at wu'ck! I will go fer de young missy!" and fairly thrusting Roger Mordaunt into the shelter of the wagons, Snowflake turned and darted toward the western border of the motte.

He was not to reach that point, however.

Thirty paces from the wagons he was met by Royale, slowly retreating, stubbornly contesting each foot of the way, his revolvers cracking at almost every step.

Halting a moment, Snowflake took in the details of the situation so far as the gloom would permit, then pushed forward to a position beside the stranger, crying:

"Stiddy, boss—stiddy! an' I'll gib yer a lif'!"

At the same instant his revolvers began to crack with a steadiness and effect that would have done credit to a veteran. The Apaches were pushing boldly forward, and at the same time spreading from the center to right and left.

"They intend to flank us, and thus hem us in!" said Royale grimly, during a momentary lull.

"Do you come from the train?"

"I does, boss. May I ax ef yer see'd a gal out dar on de plain?"

"I did—Miss Pauline Mordaunt. She is now a captive in the hands of the Apaches!"

There was a desperate ring in Royale's voice. It did not escape Snowflake.

"Boss, may I ax yer—"

"Royale is my name—Richard Royale."

"But here come the red-skins again, full-tilt! Shoulder to shoulder, pardner, and we'll drill moonlight through their ranks! Every chamber's filled, and each bullet good for a red—if they crowd! Retreat to the wagons, and make every shot count!"

Just in time, those swiftly-uttered words; for with the last syllable Royale's weapons began to crack, discounting only by a breath the sharp dual report of the revolvers of Snowflake.

Step by step the two fell back until the wagons were reached—the coveted shelter gained. Then the dull roar of repeated volleys from the rifles of Mordaunt and his party took the place of the rattling discharge of revolvers; and the Apaches wavered, then beat a quick retreat.

"Well done, my lads!" Roger Mordaunt exclaimed, nervously running his fingers through his dark-gray locks. "They are hardly likely to bother us again; but keep your eyes peeled!"

"Who have we here, Snowflake?"

"A friend, Mars' Mordaunt."

"Dick Royale, Mr. Mordaunt!" and the newcomer stepped forward with extended hand.

"Ah! I am glad you have come, Dick!" exclaimed Mordaunt, clasping the proffered member. "You are not a breath too soon!"

"And Pauline—what of her, Snowflake?"

"Captured by the Apaches!" volunteered Royale, quickly. "She was seized and borne

away at the very moment I reached her side, the old devil having her in charge, holding her up to shield himself!"

Roger Mordaunt uttered a groan.

"Great God! This is terrible!" he muttered.

"What will Jackson say?"

At that juncture Nellie came up, saying:

"What is it, papa? What has happened to Pauline? Tell me—has she been captured by the Indians?"

"She has, my child," returned Mordaunt, brokenly. "Heaven help her! I fear she is beyond our reach!"

"Not while life lasts!" Royale fervently ejaculated; "for I shall follow them to the end—even to their most remote mountain fastness!"

"Bravely spoken!" exclaimed Nellie, white to the lips.

"You are Richard Royale?"

"I am. You have not forgotten me?"

"No; and even in the gloom, you look familiar."

"And yet I have changed greatly, Miss Nellie."

"But where is your guide, Long Pete Jenkins?"

Roger Mordaunt briefly explained the absence of the veteran plainsman.

"And Big Dale, Mr. Royale—where is he?" asked Nellie, abruptly.

Royale started. Hidden by the darkness, a most disagreeable expression crept into his face. What a multitude of disquieting thoughts that simple query brought in its train!

"He is dead!" he replied, in subdued strains.

"Dead!" exclaimed his auditors, visibly surprised and distressed.

"Yes—another victim of the great terror of this region, the Apaches! We rode into an ambush, and he was killed at the first fire."

"It was only by the most desperate—"

"Mars' Morda'nt!" interrupted the voice of Snowflake from one of the wagons.

"Well, 'Flake?"

"De debbil's am er comin' ter lock ho'n's wif us ag'in—er creepin' like snakes in the grass!"

In good season came the warning from the faithful negro, for the next moment, with a burst of yells and whoops that would have done credit to an infernal legion, the renegade Apaches hurled themselves against the train.

But not without bitter cost was that deadly, almost irresistible onslaught! The rifles behind the wagons opened in a heavy, continuous roar for a moment, to be superseded by the keen, whip-like crack of revolvers and short, sharp cries of triumph, hate and rage, telling of a fearful hand-to-hand struggle!

Then, at the critical moment—at the juncture when it seemed that the savages must triumph, must force their way into the little inclosure by sheer weight of numbers—there arose from the plain east of the motte a sound that struck consternation to the very souls of the Apaches, inspired the beleaguered travelers to the heights of heroism—the blare of a bugle, sounding the charge!

"Glory!" fairly yelled Snowflake, leaping up and cracking his heels together. "Pour it into 'em! De sojers am er comin'! Good-by, Billy Injun—good-by! dis wale of tears knows yer no moah! Golly!"

It was, indeed, with a feeling of the most intense relief that the entire party noted the abrupt flight of the Apaches.

There was no time for congratulation just then, however, for scarcely had the last red-skin disappeared when from a point within the borders of the timber there came the hail:

"Ho thar! Mordaunt!"

"Long Pete Jenkins—Heaven be praised!" exclaimed Roger, joyously. Then an answer:

"Hallo! hallo!"

"Be ther coast cla'r, pardner?"

An affirmative reply being given, the next moment two men rode up to the train, their horses wet and dripping.

"Mordaunt, I've fetched yer brother with me!" announced Long Pete, sententiously, as he sprung from the saddle and proceeded to tether his horse.

The announcement drew forth a cry, half of joy, half of praise.

"Roger!"

"Jackson!"

And thus the brothers met, hand in hand, eye to eye.

"And my Pauline—where is she?" queried Jackson Mordaunt, after a moment's silence.

Roger grew white to the lips. He attempted to speak; but the words died in his throat.

Quick to note his brother's agitation—himself trembling with anxiety—Jackson cried:

"What evil has befallen her? Has—"

"Listen, uncle!" gently interrupted Nellie, stepping forward and capturing his hand. "It is something terrible we have to tell you, yet you cannot regret it more keenly, more bitterly, than do we!"

"Your worst fears are realized! Pauline was captured by the Indians!"

And so the hard task was accomplished—the grim truth made known.

Not a word—even a sound—betrayed the heart-rending agony of Jackson Mordaunt.

Among strangers, his stoical silence might have passed for indifference; but the little cluster of friends about him knew that his grief was deep and bitter.

"Oh! Lawd!" groaned Long Pete, with a tumultuous sigh; "I'd 'a' sworn on a Bible it war a-comin'! I've felt it in my old bones for a week!"

"But we'll foller ther cusses—dern 'em! an' we'll git the gal, too!"

"That's w'ot I will, pardner!" and his great hands closed sympathetically upon Jackson Mordaunt's shoulders.

Hopeful enough, truly; but a stray moonbeam, shooting down through the interlacing boughs and across the giant borderer, showed a face of deathlike hue!

And yet Jackson Mordaunt saw cause for hope, in that same visage; for the blue eyes were all aglow, and back of that unnatural pallor was something grimly suggestive of dauntless courage—of fixed determination!

"You'll do it, Pete, if mortal can—Heaven bless you!" he muttered, brokenly. Then, with outstretched hands, turning abruptly to his brother:

"Rest assured, Roger, that I attach no blame to you or yours! Such is the fortune of war, and we should be duly thankful that Nellie is spared to us."

"You are certainly correct, Mr. Mordaunt! No blame attaches to any member of your brother's party!" and Royale stepped to the front. "When I say that I am Dick Royale, and Pauline was captured within three paces of me, then you may see where the blame rests—if blame there be!"

"You here, Dick! This is indeed a surprise!" exclaimed Jackson Mordaunt, and he proceeded to bestow upon his prospective son-in-law a fitting welcome.

"I regret that it was utterly impossible for me to arrive sooner," pursued Royale, detailing such of the incidents of the capture as he deemed of most importance, just then. "But I shall strive to make amends by keeping in the van of the pursuing party."

"Ye'll do nothin' ov ther sort!" averred Long Pete, with considerable acerbity. "I've got the leetle matter in charge, an' thar's on'y two men on top ov this hyar footstool wo't kin take a hand! They be Big Dale an' Dan Yuba!"

"An' speakin' ov Big Dale—he sh'd be hyar, I reckon."

"No; he was killed by the Apaches, to-day!"

Long Pete leaped fully a foot into the air. "Rubbed out by reds!" he ejaculated, shrilly. "Say it ag'in, pardner! I—I—My pard wiped out—ther dandy whirly-gust ov de'th and deestruction ov ther hull sou'west! It don't seem right—it don't! Say it ag'in, pardner! Slow an' easy—for I can't believe it!"

"It is a fact, nevertheless," affirmed Royale, quietly. "We were ambushed by three Apaches, and Dale Keith—Nature's nobleman, every inch of him—fell from his saddle at the first fire!"

"An' ther 'Paches?" gritted Jenkins.

Royale tapped his revolver butts significantly.

"I buried poor Dale just where he had fallen, then rode forward, eager to finish my journey," he said, in conclusion.

Just a moment Long Pete stood grim and silent, then awkwardly put forth his hand, saying:

"Young feller, shake! Ef ye wiped out them durned reds, an' planted Dale, es ye say, I owe ye one!"

"And we'll square the matter by my join—"

"I didn't say that!" interrupted Jenkins, in an expostulatory tone, in which was noticeable traces of his previous harshness. "No! I must foller the trail, alone!"

"But, surely, you will take a number of the soldiers with you! It would be suicide for one man to undertake such a mission!" remonstrated Royale, visibly nettled.

"Mebbe; but better that than ther risk ov de'th ter ther gal," was the cool response. "Ef fer blue-coats—wal, if thar's one within fifteen or twenty miles, I'd miss my guess!"

"But the bugle?"

Jenkins produced and held up to view the instrument in question, saying:

"On'y a ruse ter scatter ther reds, ye see. I always kerry it on trips like ther present one."

"But, friends, I'm off! Ef I ain't back by daybreak, pull ahead fer ther Hidden Hope, an' we'll j'ine ye thar, Pauline an' me."

"Ef Dan Yuba shows up, put him arter me, hot-foot! Fer work like this, he's ekil ter a regiment, every time!"

At that instant, forth from the adjacent shadows strode a man—a short, solidly-built fellow, a dwarfed Hercules.

"Ye bet, ole pard! That's me—twenty-four carats fine, an' not ter rust!" he exclaimed, striding boldly up to the wagons. "W'ot's in ther wind now? Got a bee-tree ter bu'st, or is it on'y a few red-tops?"

Long Pete was at a loss for words suitable to express his satisfaction.

The new-comer was none other than the redoubtable Dan Yuba!

CHAPTER XVIII.

WITHIN THE ENEMY'S LAIR.

"YE aire the lad, an' no mistake!" the Giant Ranger cried, as he sprung forward and greeted Yuba with a bear-like hug. "An' how'd ye leave Black Feathers an' his bucks?"

Before the dwarfed Hercules could reply, a strange sound greeted the ears of the party, coming from the prairie to the westward.

"Hark!" ejaculated Yuba, gliding out from the long arms of the gangling giant. "What's that?"

All listened intently. A moment, and then came the report of firearms, mingled with fierce, warlike yells.

"Ef it ain't dog eat dog—blame me!" uttered Long Pete, in a tone betraying no slight degree of satisfaction. "Yuba, ye've gone an' did it!"

"Jes' so, pard! Ther renegade reds hev run smack-dab inter Black Feathers's band!" complacently declared the scout. "But that ain't ther hull ov it, pardner!"

"Ther renegades hevn't a hoof left! Twenty odd—an' I got 'em all!"

"Ha!"

"Right at the aidge ov ther timber," Yuba continued, with his thumb pointing over his shoulder. "I kalkilated another party w'u'd be able ter use 'em arter the'r Kilkenny cats' tussel, an' I just brought 'em inter camp."

"But w'ot on airth's wrong with ye, folkses? Cain't see much, but ye seem as glum as a corpus at a picnic! Anybody killed, or—Great Rockies! bet a hoss the reds got a gal!"

"Ye're right, Dan!" returned Long Pete, with renewed gravity. "They've kerried off Pauline, Jackson's darter. I war jest startin' on the'r trail when ye kem up."

"Edzactly!" and Yuba nodded violently. "I might 'a' knowned it sooner—ef I'd on'y 'a' stopped ter argie the matter a leetle. Folkses, I see'd yer gal not ten minutes ago!"

"W'ot's thet?" demanded Jenkins, his voice rising above the ejaculations of the other members of the party.

"Jes' as I say, Pete! While I war busy with the critters, a party ov five or six passed me 'bout three hundred yards ter the'r north'ard, ridin' like ther wind straight fer the'r foot-hills; an' I'm putty sart'in I caught ther flutter ov a female's garmint!

"An' ef sech war ther case, it's derned lucky she war speerited off so, fer ef she'd bin caught in the whirly-gust goin' on out thar—Wal, I'd pity her friends a heap more than I do!"

"Straddle hoss, Pard Pete. It's a leetle resky, but we'll jump right on ter the'r trail while it's hot."

Even before he had ceased speaking, Dan Yuba turned toward the captured animals to select mounts, knowing that they were in prime condition.

Snowflake hurriedly brought forth Pauline's saddle and bridle, which he placed upon a horse selected by Jenkins.

Five minutes later, followed by a unanimous godspeed, the two bordermen rode forth from the motte, Jenkins leading the horse for Pauline, Yuba an extra animal for an emergency.

"Due north, pard," uttered the dwarfed Hercules, as they swept around the border of the timber. "We've got ter circle wide ter keep our skirts cl'ar ov thet fracas out thar."

"Ye bet," was the grim response. "Reckon we wouldn't amount ter a hossfly in a hornets' nest in that muss."

"At any rate, it'd hurt our chancies, fer some ov each party air bound ter pull through an' git back to theyr camp," observed Yuba.

"But I say, Pete, didn't I see young Royale back thar?"

"Ya-as, ye did."

"But I didn't see Dale, pard," pursued Yuba, interrogatively.

"No, pard, ye didn't. W'ot's more, ye've looked yer last on pore Keith," and Jenkins repeated Royale's story of the death of their fellow-borderman.

Great was the grief excited by the narration. The three had been as brothers, so closely inter-linked had their lives become.

For a space of several minutes neither uttered a word. Their course had changed from north to west. Then, as it swerved to the southward, Yuba ventured to ask:

"An' Royale, Pete—how does he size up?"

Jenkins gave vent to a significant grunt.

"Tain't fer me ter say much, Dan," he returned, with evident restraint; "but betwixt us, he ain't the reller I hed expected an' hoped ter see. Mind ye, I ain't sayin' a word! Twouldn't be the chean white thing jist yet. Ye kin 'most always jedge ther depth ov a cl'ar stream; but ther same water, arter a storm, 'u'd be a durned onsart'in thing."

"Ev'ry time," assented Yuba.

"Now, keep yer eyes open, pard, for it's time we hit the trail."

"An' mebbe a few scatterin' Paches, too, ef ther trail leads inter the renegade camp," supplemented Long Pete. "Ther tussle back thar aire over with, an' w'ot reds aire left will likely hunt theyr hole, lookin' fer blue-coats at ev'ry jump."

"I heerd the bugle," said Yuba, smiling grimly.

"But hyar's ther trail, an' now we'll cork up."

A brief examination served to confirm the belief that it was the trail of the party seen by Dan Yuba, and without loss of time the tireless pards were again in the saddle.

For upward of two hours, they pushed steadily along, the moon affording ample light by which to follow the plainly-marked trail.

Fraught with weird excitement, with deadly peril, was that midnight chase across the plain; but the pards were insensible to the one, cared naught for the other.

Not until they were within the foot-hills did they again dismount, this time in the midst of a thick cluster of trees at the mouth of a gloomy-looking gorge.

"Thar's ther outlet ov ther renegades' den," uttered Long Pete, in a cautious tone, inclining his head toward the dismal opening.

"Ye're right, Petesy!" responded Yuba, as guardedly. "Ther question now arises, W'ot aire we goin' ter do, an' how?"

"Fu'st ov all, we'd better get the horses under kiver, ter ther north'ard, round ther foot-hills," Jenkins suggested, after a moment's cogitation.

"Twon't do ter leave 'em hyar."

"No; fer ten ter one, Death-Eagle's scouts an' spies 'u'd hit on 'em in less than an hour."

"We'll jist call that p'int settled," declared Jenkins. "Then, arter we've cached the critters in ther chaparral north, we'll seek an unguarded p'int at which ter enter ther camp. We cain't use this gorge, fer we might as well tackle a masked battery."

"Jes' so, pard; fer ef any ov ther reds hev got back ter camp, ye kin bet high thar's a purty ambush planted up thar in the gorge, sum'ers."

Remounting, the trailers cautiously skirted the foot-hills, keeping well within the shadows of the timber, until they had reached a point close upon a mile from the mouth of the gorge, and at which the desired shelter was to be had.

Having secreted the horses, they carefully examined their weapons, then commenced the ascent of the hill, intent on approaching the Apache camp from the rear, each carrying his lariat.

Contrary to their expectations, it was but a few minutes until they had reached a point whence the lodges were visible.

At the foot of a long and at times precipitous slope, directly before them, in a great patch of the hills, lay the temporary village.

The descent of the pards was by no means rapid. The better part of an hour elapsed before they gained a position from which they could secure a satisfactory view of the pocket. As for the encampment, there was not yet enough of it visible to indicate its strength or arrangement.

"Slow an' easy, pard!" uttered Long Pete, as a growl of impatience escaped Dan Yuba. "Mebbe we'll git thar ter-night—mebbe not, fer a week. It's a big stake, we're playin' for."

"Thet's jest it!" Yuba gritted. "It's a big stake. Ef it war on'y a passel ov furs, or a bunch ov hoofs, I'd lay by a month with never a whimper!"

"We aire goin' down thar this night, Pete, ef it takes a laig!"

"Good enough!" assented the gangling giant, "I'm thinkin' ther same way—ef it brings no resk ter Pauline."

"Now, le's work down a leetle ways—ter that bit ov timber jest this side ov ther pocket. Seems as if ther' might be good kiver thar."

"Thet's our p'int," Yuba acquiesced, and they glided forward.

The cluster of trees proved a point even more advantageous than the pards had suspected, the spreading branches shutting out the moonlight and affording, at the same time, an excellent view of Death-Eagle's lair.

In fact, Long Pete at once jumped to the conclusion that they had stumbled upon about the weakest point of what now appeared to be an almost impenetrable stronghold.

All around the pocket arose cliffs, varying in height from twenty to two hundred feet, with here a patch of bushes, there a mass of clinging vines, to break their gray, rocky bleakness.

So far as could be seen, the gorge was the only direct avenue leading to or from the pocket.

The trees among which Long Pete and Dan Yuba found themselves extended to the verge of the precipice—at that point a sheer descent of only twelve or fifteen feet and thence below, but of a greatly diminished size, a considerable distance across the level.

Quickly noting these features of their surroundings, the trailers proceeded to bestow upon the camp proper a more lengthy and earnest scrutiny.

No sign of life was visible; the lodges, in light and shadow alike, seemed wholly deserted.

"Ther bucks aire all down in ther gorge, in ambush," muttered Long Pete, chuckling, as he produced his lariat. "Dan, squat right hyar an' wait. I'm goin' down."

Yuba simply nodded. He knew exactly what part he was to take in the contemplated rescue.

Securing the end of the lariat to a tree, Jen-

kins adjusted the noose beneath his arms and slipped silently over the verge, to be lowered slowly and steadily by the powerful arms of the dwarfed Hercules.

A moment passed, and the lariat grew slack. Then came a slight jerk, indicating that it was to be drawn up.

Long Pete Jenkins was within the lair of the enemy.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT DESPERATE DAVE DANTON HEARD.

The expression that came upon Dave Danton's face when confronted by Richard Royale on the border of the motte, was simply, utterly indescribable.

His eyes met those of his foe with a glare in which was murder—his hands went down to his weapons with the swiftness of thought.

Nor were the feelings or the actions of self-styled Royale discounted, even in the slightest.

That there had been bad blood between the two men was apparent. The rupture was not a new one.

Their differences were not to be settled then and there, however.

The sudden and entirely unexpected uprising of the Apaches on all sides put an adjustment, amicable or otherwise, out of the question for the time being, if not forever.

Royale sprung back just in time to escape being hemmed in, turning his revolvers upon the red outlaws with such effect as to enable him to beat a retreat to the Mordaunt train.

On the other hand, Danton was not so fortunate. Caught in the midst of the onward rush of the Apaches, he was laid senseless by a hard blow from the flat of a tomahawk.

No sooner had Royale retreated into the timber than Pauline's captor appeared from the shelter of the tree behind which he had dodged, and started rapidly across the plain, bearing the unconscious girl in his long and powerful arms.

At a sharp, business-like command from him, four of the warriors secured Danton, and bearing him in their midst, followed in their chief's wake.

The strange procession made its way due northwest across the plain for perhaps a fourth of a mile, then halted in a depression in which were six horses under the charge of a solitary brave.

Upon one of the animals Danton was bound, Mazeppa-like, and then the chief mounted another, again taking Pauline in his arms.

"If Long Lance succeeds as well as has Three Bears, he will have good reason to be proud of his night's work!" he exclaimed in the Apache tongue.

"Three Bears is a great chief. He has captured a prize that will brighten his lodge," averred a lean, scrawny-looking savage, gazing hungrily at the face of the beautiful captive.

"Thin Beaver talks well," returned Three Bears. "Let him bear my greeting to Long Lance, saying to him that I wish him success.

The four remaining savages having mounted, the cavalcade then rode away to the foot-hills, while Thin Beaver, relieved of the horses, swiftly approached the train.

Not until within the bounds of Death-Eagle's encampment did either Pauline or Danton give any indication of returning consciousness.

Arrived there, Pauline was at once carried by Three Bears to a lodge standing close in against the face of an overhanging cliff at the western side of the pocket, where she was placed upon a couch or pallet of skins and securely pinioned.

Danton, feigning semi-insensibility, covertly watched all that was visible of the proceeding from his uncomfortable position.

On the return of Three Bears, the desperado was taken from the back of the horse and half-carried, half-dragged through the camp and into a lodge in the shadows of a clump of trees near the eastern extremity of the pocket.

Then the braves retired, leaving their chief with the apparently unconscious captive.

Danton felt that his fate was sealed.

The expression upon the face of Three Bears was notmistakable. He was simply awaiting a full return of consciousness. His captive was unarmed, and, all things considered, the chief could well afford, just then, to bide his time.

Dave Danton was quite willing that the evil moment be deferred. His mind was not inactive. He hoped, almost against hope, yet to devise ways and means to extricate himself from his decidedly perilous predicament.

Several minutes slipped by in silence, without any indication of impatience on the part of the imperturbable Three Bears. Then the flap covering the entrance was lifted, and Death-Eagle, the Merciless, glided into the lodge.

An evil smile was upon his face, and his dark eyes glittered wickedly as he glanced at Danton.

"How is he, Ben?" he queried, in perfect English, indicating, with a jerk of his head, the captive.

"His wits are wool-gathering, pap," was the guardedly-uttered reply, in the same tongue. "Fact is, we missed it in permitting him to leave the camp at all."

"So we did—so we did," acquiesced the elder. "But it did not occur to me that the fellow

might be in a position to impart information so much to be desired."

A strange thrill shot through Dave Danton. It was only by a strong effort that he kept from betraying his real condition, mental and physical.

The truth was out, and a grim, significant truth it was.

Death-Eagle, the Merciless, and the equally notorious Three Bears were white men, masquerading as renegade Apaches!

"In fact," pursued the chief, "I did not give the matter the thought it really deserved."

"I saw nothing deep in the fellow; he seemed only a sort of roving sport—just the kind of a galoot he professed to be—and, as he had once done us splendid service, I let him slide."

"And regretted it within fifteen minutes," added Three Bears, bending over Danton and noting his condition.

"Exactly! I had wondered what could have brought a wagon-train, such as our scouts reported, up into this region; but I confess that it never more than vaguely occurred to me that that fellow might be able to explain it all."

"He can do that, and much more," Three Bears averred, as he seated himself beside the captive, in a position to note the slightest change in the upturned face. "In short, he can let in on certain matters such a flood of light as will make this the grand turning-point of our lives!"

"Eh?"

"Now, just sit down, pap!" exclaimed Three Bears, with an impatient gesture. "And remember, I mean just what I say. School your nerves for something wholly unexpected; for 'I've a tale to unfold'—a chapter of discoveries strange, startling, wonderful!"

Visibly excited, Death-Eagle obeyed. To him, the expression upon the face of his villainous son was possessed of a peculiar significance. He realized that a crisis of some sort was at hand.

"Speak it out, Ben!" he ejaculated, grinning wolfishly. "If it promises anything in the way of a change from this mode of life, let us have it. I'm heartily tired of our present position!"

"Here, too! And I tell you, pap, I'm going to leave it, at once—this very night!"

Then in a low, husky tone, as he abruptly leaned forward, staring straight at his father's painted face:

"Do you know whose train it was we attacked to-night?"

Death-Eagle started, then gave his head a negative shake.

"Your question is a poser," he said, with an insinuating smile. "May I ask—"

"Then," cut in Three Bears, "let me tell you that it was made up of what is left of the families of our old friends, Messrs. Jackson and Roger Mordaunt!"

"The Mordaunts! Impossible!" and the chief of the Red Renegades gained his feet, to all appearance wild with excitement.

Three Bears smiled exultantly.

"Not at all—it is an assured fact!" he declared, positively.

"But, sit down—sit down, and keep quiet! There is far more to do!"

Again the chief obeyed, weak and trembling.

"Go on—let me hear it all!" he panted, rather than said. "Perhaps the hour I have awaited so long is at hand!"

"Just arrived!" asseverated Three Bears, cynically. "See here, pap, you must buckle down on that excitable imagination of yours. It'll lead you into a strait-jacket if you continue to indulge it, for time is precious. Do you understand?"

A sullen nod was the only reply.

"Now to recapitulate a trifle," proceeded the younger villain.

"As you are aware, when this fellow whom we have known as White Panther left the camp, he was closely followed by myself and a selected squad of braves, for from his actions I suspected that he would go direct to the train and warn it of our ambush on the crest of Dead-Tree Knob, and I was determined to baffle him if it lay in my power."

"To cut a long story short, he found that the Mordaunts had not reached the Knob, and he pushed across the plain to intercept them."

Long Lance had grown impatient at the delay when we reached the Knob, and sent forward with us a runner to ascertain the whereabouts of the train.

We learned that, contrary to our expectations, the Mordaunts had gone into camp at the Lone Timber, and, while the runner went back to fetch up Long Lance and his party, we left our horses and under cover of the grass approached to within a dozen feet of the western edge of the motte.

It chanced that one of the girls had been posted there as a sentry, and within three minutes it was perfectly clear to me that I had arrived just in the nick of time to overhear a most interesting revelation.

"For, scarcely had I settled into a comfortable position to await the arrival of Long Lance, when who should appear before the girl but

this galoot here—Rugg McBuff, Dave Danton, or White Panther, just as you choose to call him."

"It is needless to repeat all that passed between the two. McBuff, it seems, had become enamored of the girl, Pauline Mordaunt, and his passion had gotten him into trouble with the entire party; but, to curry favor, he told the girl that the train was surrounded, pleaded his cause, and 'fessed up' to any number of misdeeds, all in one breath.

"And now comes the astounding part of the affair.

"You remember Dick Royale?"

A wicked gleam appeared in the eyes of the old chief.

"Only too well, my son!" he gritted, his voice hoarse with vindictive hatred. "Curse him! wasn't it he who nosed out our connection with the Royale-Mordaunt crash and forced us to leave for the West between two days, five years ago?

"Yes, yes! I remember him! Am I not to to this day hunted, yet dreaded, as the Branded Viper?"

"Well and good!" uttered Three Bears. "Let it suffice, just now, that you have not forgotten Dick Royale. He'll never trouble your or yours again."

"What—what mean you, Ben?"

"Brother Rube has avenged our wrongs!"

Death-Eagle seemed dazed at the bare announcement. He stared blankly at the face of his evil son, his own hideous visage working convulsively.

Then with a bound he suddenly gained his feet, flinging up his hands and uttering a shriek of wild, fierce delight.

"Rube—Rube Harpy!" he enunciated, his tones sinking to a whisper, his clinched hands beating against his breast, after a maniacal fashion. "Ah! Duke Harpy! you have not lived the past three years in vain!"

"Where is he, Ben?"

"With the Mordaunts, in the guise of his foe, Dick Royale," and Ben Harpy proceeded with his narrative, repeating nearly all that had passed between Dave Danton and Pauline Mordaunt at the edge of the motte.

"Recognizing Rube, at the last moment, I gave orders that he was not to be harmed," he said, in conclusion. "No sooner did he speak than I penetrated his disguise.

"And now, pap, as soon as this galoot can speak, we must pump him dry—then put an end to his meddling. I am morally sure the Mordaunts have stumbled upon some sort of a big pay-streak up in these hills—a pay-streak which it behooves us to take possession of."

"I haven't the remotest doubt that Rube has been working in the same direction, although it must be admitted that his old-time passion for Pauline may have been his ruling motive."

"At any rate, if Long Lance and his braves are successful, Rube and Roger Mordaunt's daughter will be brought in between now and daylight, captives. We must throw aside this disguise, assume an attire becoming civilized gentlemen, make a mock rescue of the girls, and with them and Rube leave this place forever, going by way of the secret pass."

"It can be done," declared Duke Harpy, nodding his approbation, his brain working with feverish rapidity upon the details of the scheme suggested. "Both of us have changed greatly—so greatly in fact, that there is little or no risk of recognition."

"But if Long Lance fails?"

"Then we shall seek Rube, later on," Ben Harpy returned. "We must join hands with him in this matter, for then, with the exception of poor Madge, the Brood of the Branded Viper would again be complete and well-nigh invincible."

"Poor Madge! she is dead and out of her misery long ago, I fear!" uttered the old chief, with a sound akin to a sigh. "Surely, we had cause to hate Dick Royale! Had—"

The flap of the tent was at that juncture lifted, revealing the face of an Apache brave.

Duke Harpy sprung to his feet. The hoarse, almost unintelligible jargon coming from the lips of the savage warned him that an unexpected peril was at hand.

"You are needed, pap—go!"

"And Danton, there?"

"Leave me to deal with him! Just you remember my plans and act accordingly."

Old Harpy, with a muttered imprecation, sullenly strode out of the lodge, his son following him to the entrance.

Dave Danton covertly noted the move.

"Now is the time!" he thought, and he stealthily arose from the pallet.

At that instant, Ben Harpy turned—an oath escaping him as he noted the attitude of his captive.

Without a breath of hesitation, Danton, although wholly unarmed, sprung straight at the throat of his desperate foe.

CHAPTER XX.

SCHEMING TO ESCAPE.

"HOUND, you have heard all!" screamed Ben Harpy, madly, as he recoiled, and with drawn knife awaited the furious onset of Desperate

Dave Danton. "You have played the eavesdropper! You have learned our secrets. I'll kill you—I'll kill you!"

Danton halted. It was only too plain that the renegade held the winning hand—that strategy must take the place of force. He pressed his hands to his head; his face assumed a dazed look; he seemed both startled and mystified by Harpy's ferocious threat.

"Kill me!" he ejaculated, staggering like a drunken man, while a puzzled smile crept over his bloody features. "Kill me! Come; don't make a song of it, Three Bears. I could stand 'most anything better than music like that!"

"Going to give me the knife, eh? Well, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you did, you idiotic red donkey! A red-skin is a red-skin the world over!"

"Oh, but I ain't a red-skin, you know!" promptly protested the renegade, savagely shaking his head. "I'm just as white as you are, every whit, and it's useless for you to attempt to conceal your knowledge of the fact!

"You have taken a mean advantage of us, to play the eavesdropper in furtherance of some end of your own, and I reckon it'll be serving you just right to put you out of the way!"

"And you are just as white as I am!" exclaimed Danton, assuming an air of profound incredulity.

"I just am!" iterated the renegade. "I am no more an Apache than you are. My skin is white, and my name is Ben Harpy!"

"And maybe you've heard that same name before?"

"Harpy!" Danton echoed, with a start. "Have I heard it before? Say, you—you cross-grained cuss! I've a pard named Harpy—Rube Harpy."

"Oh, yes; I suppose so."

"Fact! And we're on the biggest lay of our lives, just now. In a word, we're working to obtain possession of a gold-mine—a treasure-deposit discovered in these hills by one Jackson Mordaunt, an old-time enemy of my pard."

"Oh, you are, are you?" exclaimed the renegade, jeeringly, controlling himself by a master effort. "A likely story, that, Dave Danton. Maybe you'll have the kindness to sit down and give us the scheme in detail."

"And maybe I won't!" quoth Desperate Dave, readily penetrating his captor's shallow pretense of incredulity. "I may die here, but I shall not spoil my partner's game by blabbing it. Of that you may be sure, for Rube Harpy and myself have trained together too long for one to attempt to better himself to the injury of the other.

"No, sirree, my frisky Benjamin! Kill, and be hanged to you. I can't die younger."

The very coolness of the words seemed to startle the renegade. He stared steadily at his captive a full minute.

"See here, pardy," he at length broke forth, making a movement as if about to sheathe his knife; "see here—what's your little game, anyway?—A bluff?"

"Try me and see!" returned Danton grimly, a mocking smile again crossing his bloodstained features.

"Very good!" was the equally grim response. "To begin with, how much of what passed between my father and myself did you overhear?"

"Enough to convince me of two facts."

"Name them, then."

"The first is, that you came within a sprat of most effectually blocking your brother's game, to night!"

"Go on."

"That you are just now making a first-class donkey of yourself."

Ben Harpy bowed profoundly, then deliberately returned his knife to its place in his belt.

"You may be right—I give you the benefit of the doubt," he observed, a crafty glitter in his eyes. "If, as you claim, you are the pard of Rube Harpy, there shall be no bad blood between us.

"Can you back up that claim?"

"Oh, yes—and most willingly, I assure you; for, to be frank about it, Rube and I are bucking against heavy odds, and a little help from the proper quarter wouldn't come amiss."

"In other words, the game is open to us if we choose to enter?"

"That is for Rube to say. By this time he is firmly installed in the midst of the enemy as Richard Royale—if the train escaped from your red-skins."

"It did," was the terse response. "We have just learned that, owing to the unexpected arrival of a strong squad of blue-coats, our braves were forced to retreat."

"All the better for Rube."

"But here—a glance at these papers should convince you that I have accurately described the relations existing between Rube and myself."

As he spoke, Danton drew from an inner pocket a small packet of papers, which he handed over to his captor.

Ben Harpy grasped at it eagerly—so eagerly, in fact, that it slipped from his hand to the ground.

Forgetful of his wariness, he stooped to secure it.

The next instant Desperate Dave was upon him, dealing him a kick just back of the ear, which toppled him over senseless.

"Aha! my bird!" ejaculated the captive, trembling with delight and exultation. "You were wary enough, and yet you fluttered into the snare."

"I'll relieve you of some of your toggery, just to see what sort of a figure I shall cut as Three Bears."

Danton set to work without loss of time, his first move being to disarm, bind and gag the senseless renegade.

In due course, he concluded his task.

What a figure he presented.

Arrayed in the coat and head-dress of the renegade chief, and with his hands and face liberally daubed with the pigments so dear to the heart of the Apache, his aspect was as ferocious as villainous. The only weak point in his presentment was his luxuriant mustache.

"By keeping a little shady, I'll pass, I reckon," he muttered.

"Now, to get rid of this carrion. Old Duke Harpy may return at any moment, and what a hue and cry he'd raise at sight of his precious son! But how and where?—that's the question, and a puzzling one it is, too."

"Not here in the lodge, for the chances are that he would be found just at the wrong moment."

"No, he must be taken from here, and the sooner the better. I'll reconnoiter."

With a searching glance at Harpy, Danton glided cautiously out of the lodge.

To his inexpressible relief, the camp was silent, without a red-skin in view.

A further survey decided his course of action.

Directly in the rear of the tent, a few rods to the northward, was a heavy growth of chaparral, extending back to the face of the cliff forming the boundary of the pocket at that point.

"I'll just chock his royal highness, Mr. Harpy, into that bit of brush," mused the desperado. "He'll be safe enough there until we've had ample time to get clear of this infernal den."

In due course, the feat was accomplished, the unconscious renegade being stowed away in a dark nook at the foot of the cliff.

"Now for Pauline," thought Danton, as he skirted the chaparral. "I will apprise her of the exact state of affairs, then seek the secret outlet of which Duke Harpy spoke. If I could only hit upon some expeditious way to find it! if it is securely hidden, a search will only be徒劳."

Keeping well in the shadows, the desperate adventurer rapidly made his way to the lodge in which Pauline Mordaunt was confined.

Arrived in the immediate vicinity, Danton halted long enough to assure himself that the guard had not deserted the position assigned him.

"Curse it!" he gritted; "I was in hope that the red-skin had joined his fellows in the gorge!"

"But he is there, and now my work is deadly perilous; for my disguise is not such as to withstand a close inspection."

"I must hit upon some ruse to draw him away."

With Danton, just then, to think was to act.

A large pebble thrown at the sentry attracted his attention, and Danton beckoned him to approach.

Standing in the shadows, the desperado readily passed as Ben Harpy, and the red-skin glided rapidly toward him.

It was a fatal move for the red renegade.

"Another obstacle removed!" grimly muttered Danton. "The way is now clear to Pauline."

Boldly crossing the space of moonlight, he entered the lodge.

"Miss Mordaunt."

A moment of silence followed the cautiously-uttered exclamation; then, in a faint tone came the response:

"I am here. Who speaks?"

"It is I, McBuff or Danton. I have come to tell you to hope for the best. If I meet with no ill-luck you shall be with your friends within a few hours."

"Are you bound?"

"Hand and foot," Pauline replied.

"But how came you here?"

Danton rightly suspected that there was a tone of suspicion in the query.

"I was brought here a captive with you, but have succeeded in getting out of durance vile," he replied, and he rapidly narrated his experience, keeping back the fact that Death-Eagle and Three Bears were members of the Harpy family, simply stating that they were white outlaws, father and son.

"And this secret pass, do you think you can find it?" Pauline asked.

"I must, and I will, one way or another," was the determined reply.

"Now I will relieve you of your pinions, and you must remain quiet until I return. I shall be gone not a moment longer than is necessary."

Pauline assented to the arrangement. Danton

cut away her bonds and thrust a revolver into her hand. He then left the lodge.

Again seeking the shadows, he made another thorough survey of the visible portion of the encampment, finding nothing to create alarm or in any way alter the aspect of affairs.

For some minutes he did not shift his position.

"It will take time, but it offers a certain result," he at length exclaimed, half-aloud; "and I will do it, for at the worst it is better than seeking the hidden outlet, and without further hesitation he strode directly across the pocket to the lodge of Ben Harpy.

Entering, he produced pencil and paper, and in the dim light hastily scrawled the following:

"PAP—Come straight to the secret pass as soon as you see this. I will be waiting there. BEN."

Placing the message where it would readily be seen by any one entering the lodge, Danton at once withdrew and secreted himself securely in the adjacent shadows.

An hour passed, with no sign of Old Duke Harpy, and the desperado was fast becoming the prey of an overpowering impatience, when at last the chief of the red renegades appeared, approaching from the direction of the gorge.

Direct to the lodge he strode, pushing aside the flap and entering without so much as a cursory glance at his surroundings.

"If the scrawl only passes muster!" breathed Danton, hopefully, as he eagerly awaited the appearance of the old chief. "Had I only been familiar with Ben Harpy's handwriting!"

Little time was left him for conjecture, however, for Duke Harpy soon came out of the lodge, and set off at a sharp pace toward the cliff forming the northern boundary of the pocket.

As was evident, the ruse had worked.

As noiseless as a shadow, grim and determined as Fate itself, Danton followed close behind the chief.

Straight ahead walked Duke Harpy, glancing neither right nor left, to all appearances with suspicions unaroused; straight onward, to disappear suddenly at the foot of the cliff.

"He has entered the secret pass," exultantly thought Danton. "The secret is out! All that remains is to get the old thief out of the way."

Parting the vines through which Harpy had gone, the trailer boldly, yet cautiously, entered the fissure beyond—a narrow, winding way along which he had to feel his way with the utmost care.

A dozen paces within the gloomy recess brought him to an abrupt angle, flooded with moonlight. Heedlessly pushing on, he with startling abruptness came face to face with Old Duke Harpy!

Upon the face of the chief was a cynical smile. In his right hand he held a leveled revolver.

"I calculate your little scheme has not panned out so very well, Mr. Danton," he exclaimed, his voice sinking into a low, hissing strain. "You are a pretty shrewd fellow, but Duke Harpy is too old a bird to be caught with anything in the way of chaff."

"And now just oblige me by raising your hands. Before putting you out of your misery, I desire to interview you in regard to the whereabouts and condition of my son, Ben Harpy."

"Don't mention it—only too happy, you know," murmured Danton, striving hard to appear unconcerned, yet fairly quivering with the excitement of a new-born hope; for, beyond the old chief and creeping toward him with consummate stealth was a crouching form—a form unmistakably that of a white man!

Just a breath—then the butt of a heavy revolver descended with crushing force upon the head of Duke Harpy, dropping him senseless in his tracks.

One keen, piercing glance at the face of his deliverer, and Danton started back, sick at heart, aghast with terror.

Little wonder.

The man was none other than Royal Richard, the redoubtable Red-Hand Sport!

CHAPTER XXI.

LONG PETE'S BLUNDER AND WHAT IT COST.

The very first move upon the part of Long Pete Jenkins when Dan Yuba, from his station at the top of the heavily-wooded bluff, had withdrawn the lariat in pursuance of a prearranged signal, was to make a thorough reconnaissance of his immediate surroundings, to assure himself that his descent into the lair of the red renegades had been witnessed by no prowling red-skin.

For the task before the indomitable plainsman was not such as to admit of anything short of the most rigid caution; and, even with that, the odds were overwhelmingly against its being smoothly and successfully accomplished, owing, in chief, to the extent of the encampment and the nature of its surroundings.

If surprised and cut off from the medium of escape offered by Dan Yuba's lariat, Long Pete was doomed, and with him Pauline Mordaunt.

Satisfied with the result of his observations, the gangling giant at length turned his attention to the lodges, hoping almsct against hope,

to note something which would give him an inkling as to the exact position of the captive Pauline.

"It is of no use—I've got to make ther rounds, cost what it may!" he muttered. "Ole Death-Eagle hes hidden ther girl away, an' I must seek ter find her."

"An' fu'st p'int ov all, I'll strike fer ther big lodge ov ther chief, right in the center ov ther camp; and, peeping close in against the face of the cliff, he glided rapidly through the undergrowth.

At a point not beyond four or five rods from the place at which he descended into the pocket his foot came in contact with a soft, yielding shape, and he started back as a faint, half-stifled moan arose in the darkness.

With weapons in hand, he listened intently.

Might it not be some cunning trick of the red renegades—the artfully-devised and skillfully-executed ruse of one or more of the Apaches, who had chanced to witness his advent into the camp?

That was the first idea suggesting itself to the daring spy; but he quickly put it aside. A red-skin the shape might be; but the chances were decidedly against such a possibility.

Quite likely the shape would take form in a victim of the ruthless Apaches.

A moment—then again came the moan.

Cautiously, yet without hesitation, Jenkins advanced and bent over the prostrate sufferer.

In the intense gloom, the features of the latter were indistinguishable; it required but a moment, however, to arrive at a fairly accurate conclusion as to his situation.

He was a captive, bound and gagged, just returning to consciousness. In some manner, the gag had become partially disarranged.

A further examination convinced Long Pete that the fellow was not only a captive, but a white man. Thereupon, he severed his bonds and relieved him of the gag.

"I hevn't time ter stay by ye till ye're on yer pins ag'in, my hearty," mused the plainsman; "but I'll fix ye up es best I kin, an' mebbe ye'll dig out ov hyar on yer own hook w'en ye come 'round."

And then Jenkins went on his way.

Scarcely was his tall form lost in the gloom when the prostrate man raised himself to a sitting posture.

"Score one for Ben Harpy!" he hissed. "I'll baffle 'em all, yet!"

Cautiously gaining his feet, the renegade chief glided stealthily, yet swiftly toward the mouth of the gorge, his face grim and determined, his dark eyes gleaming balefully.

Within ten minutes from the time he disappeared within its dark recesses, he had returned with ten picked braves at his back.

Three of these he dispatched to the left, three to the right, to scout through the undergrowth bordering the pocket, then with the four remaining hastened direct to the ledge in which he had gone down before Danton's superior cunning.

The lodge was deserted. One glance was enough to determine that fact, and more.

On the hard-packed earthen floor lay a bit of crumpled paper.

Ben Harpy swooped down upon it like a hawk upon its prey. Smoothing it, he hastily read the brief message it contained.

"PAP—Come straight to the secret pass as soon as you see this. I will be waiting there. BEN."

For just a moment the outlaw stood aghast. Then, as the full portent of the words flashed upon him, rage and chagrin got the better of his astonishment.

"Oh, the scheming devil! he's tricked us both and rescued the girl!" he gritted. "He has escaped by way of the secret pass, too, for pap has surely fallen into the trap."

"But, by heaven! the game's not up yet! They must still be in the pass, and may be overtaken!"

Without a breath of delay, he sprung to the entrance of the lodge and sounded a signal for the immediate return of the six scouts.

They came trooping in, rallying at the quarters of their chief in an incredibly short time. Then, with the ten braves close behind him, Ben Harpy darted toward the secret pass.

"You here!"

The two words came faintly from Danton's lips, but his eyes were clear and fearless as they met those of the Red-Hand Sport.

"I am here, Desperate Dave," coldly iterated Brazzleton. "And as you are here, too, I reckon you're my meat!"

"It does look that way," reluctantly admitted the desperado.

"But I tell you, Dick Brazzleton, this move is doing your cause more harm than good—that is, if you were really Dick Royale's friend. A few hours ago, the circumstances would have been different."

"For I want you to know, Dick Brazzleton, that, bad as I am, I have jumped Rube Harpy's game for gold—have taken the opposing side and am heart and hand with the Mordaunts."

"I want you to know, too, that Pauline Mordaunt is a captive in the camp at the lower end."

of this fissure, and that every second I am held here under the muzzles of your weapons lessens her chances of escape."

A cynical smile crept into the white face of the avenging sport—a deeper glow into his dusky eyes, as the weak strains of Danton's voice died away.

"A pretty subterfuge, that, Dave Danton, under which to plead for mercy," he enunciated jeeringly. "Your brazen hardihood can scarcely be said to be on the wane. No, no! on the whole, the lie does you credit—is worthy of you!"

"And yet, it will not answer. I've trailed you too long and too hard!"

"Keep your hands up—so! Now don't so much as wink, for it is not my purpose to kill you, however deserving you may be of such a fate."

"You would—"

"These will fit you snug enough," the detective interrupted, holding up to view a pair of polished steel manacles. "And you may as well come down easy and make the best of it, Danton; for I've sworn to take you back to Colorado, and I am going to do it—hard as may be the job."

"And you'll have company, too, for Rube Harpy is not going to escape. In fact, it may safely be said that he is even now within the toils, although not yet under arrest."

"Good enough," gritted Danton, his half-shut eyes glowing darkly. "Put on the darbies! If you've got him, I'll never say a word."

Slowly the Red-Hand Sport advanced, his brightly gleaming orbs seeming to read Desperate Dave through and through.

But there was nothing indicative of trickery to be found in the cold, white face of the desperado, just then. On the contrary, there was a vague, indefinable something about it expressive of relief.

"I might have taken you into camp this afternoon, when we met at the wagon-train," pursued Brazzleton, halting within arm's length of his quarry; "but the presence of the girls deterred me. I hadn't the heart to risk their coming face to face with the grim truth then and there."

Danton nodded shortly.

"But Pauline—what of her?" he muttered, strangely hoarse and uneasy. "She is a captive back there, as I told you, and she is awaiting—"

A swift rush of feet up the pass from the pocket cut off further utterance, and the next instant Ben Harpy, at the head of a number of Apaches, came into view, scarcely a dozen paces distant.

"Run for it!" exclaimed Danton, dashing aside the manacles and bounding up the fissure. "Quick! or your life is not worth a straw!"

Royal Richard needed no second warning. A glance at the dusky horde passing through the fissure made matters plain enough. With a short, sharp cry of defiance, he darted out of sight in the shadows.

Ben Harpy halted at his father's side.

"After them!" he shouted in Apache. "Don't let either escape! If they separate, divide and follow their trails to the end!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A FOOLHARDY MOVE.

RETURN we now, for a brief space, to the Mordaunt party at the motte known as the Lone Timber.

Upon the departure of Long Pete Jenkins and Dan Yuba, the pseudo-Royale, Rube Harpy, assumed charge of the train, and at once put in effect measures preventive of a second surprise by the Apaches, distributing his forces in a really skillful manner, and winning the hearty approval of the sorrowing brothers, Jackson and Roger Mordaunt.

"Ah, Dick!" exclaimed the latter, as the trio, with Nellie, met in the triangle formed by the three wagons; "oh, my boy! had you been with us, the red devils would not have found means to reach our hearts so readily and cruelly!"

"I would have done my best, sir," was the calm response. "What that would have availed, whether much or little, is, of course, beyond our means of knowing."

"But of one fact I can assure you, my friends: I was not willingly detained. In truth, I may say that my presence here at this moment is but one of the results of rare good fortune—one of the fruits of a hard-fought battle—a battle in which no small figure was cut by our old enemy, Rube Harpy!"

The Mordaunts started. Even the shadows of the motte could not hide the agitation wrought by the words of the daring pretender.

Yet no one of them spoke; each felt that Royale's manner portended a revelation of some sort.

"At Elephant Lode, up in Colorado, our trails crossed," pursued the schemer, after a moment of intense silence. "It was upon Harpy's arrival there that he managed in some way to obtain possession of Pauline's last letter to me, containing a full explanation of her intended movements, and requesting me to join you here in New Mexico—matters of which I

have been in total ignorance until within the past few days.

"You can readily imagine, at least in outline, the manner in which the scoundrel determined to utilize the information thus received. I shall not attempt to detail his various plots, just yet; let it suffice, for the present, that I was waylaid and shot down—left for dead—by him and an ally known as Dave Danton."

"The dastard!" exclaimed Jackson Mordaunt, indignantly. "He is his father over again!"

"As truly a viper as he you branded as such!" Roger commented. "But proceed, Dick."

"Of myself, there's but little more to say," averred Royale. "In their blind haste, the villains bungled, leaving me severely wounded and unconscious. A mountaineer, chancing that way, carried me to his cabin, where I was forced to remain for some days, until my wound had healed, when I at once hurried toward Alamosa, and thence to Palomas, where I found Big Dale Keith in waiting."

"But how did you know of our movements, the letter detailing them having been stolen?" Nellie inquired, with visible curiosity.

Under cover of the darkness, a deep flush dyed the face of the pretender.

"Jim Rees, the mountaineer, found it within a rod of the point at which I had been ambushed, and so it came into my hands," he replied, without apparent hesitation.

"But, to resume: The trip from Palomas was without noteworthy adventure, up to the death of Big Dale to-night. He had pointed out the spot at which you were to go into camp, pending the arrival of Mr. Jackson Mordaunt, here; and, as soon as I had given the faithful fellow burial, I set forward, hoping to reach it without further encounter.

"In this, however, I was disappointed. My course led me within a short distance of this timber, and in the moonlight, through an opening in the trees, in passing I discovered the wagons.

"As Indian sign was plentiful, I thought best to abandon my horse, for the time being, and so approached afoot, with all the caution I could muster.

"My course took me to the western border of the motte. There an extraordinary scene presented itself—Pauline in conversation with Dave Danton, the ally of Rube Harpy!

"Quick upon this strange presentment came a discovery, startling, but to have been expected. The grass was literally alive with Apaches! Creeping Apaches, for whom Danton was acting as a decoy!

"My first impulse was to cry out and warn her of her terrible peril, but the folly of such a course was so apparent that I checked the words and hurried into the timber, from that point to make an attempt to rescue her. I was too late!"

"You did all that man could do," vouchsafed Jackson Mordaunt, when the pretender had finished. "We can only hope that Jenkins and Yuba may be successful."

"They will leave no stone unturned," assured Roger. "It would relieve my mind of a considerable weight, were they to cut short the infamous career of this Danton, or McBuff! The only pity is that the Red-Hand Sport did not put the fellow beyond the power of mischief-doing!"

Again the pretender started. A sudden chill seemed to creep over him.

"The Red-Hand Sport!" he echoed, his voice low and hollow, his hands creeping toward his weapons.

"Do you know him, Dick?" cried Nellie, eagerly.

"Do I know him!" cried Royale, the words coming from between his tightly-drawn lips with a peculiar hissing sound; "do I know him! Only too well, my dear girl! Let me tell you, here and now, that Rube Harpy and the Red-Hand Sport are one and the same!"

"Impossible!" Nellie ejaculated.

"It is an assured fact!"

"There must be some mistake!" protested the girl, with nervous energy. "Why, if Danton and Harpy are allies, should the latter, in the guise of the Red-Hand Sport, have come to our assistance so nobly this afternoon?"

"You are now speaking to me in riddles," was the cool response.

"Pardon me! I had forgotten that you knew nothing of the occurrence of which I speak," said Nellie, quietly, thereupon proceeding to recount the defeat of Danton and the two Mexicans.

Royale listened attentively, his teeth hard-set, his dark eyes aglow.

He realized that he was menaced by peril of no mean degree. This appearance of Royal Richard was as inopportune as unexpected.

For a moment the ground seemed to be slipping from beneath the feet of the desperate adventurer; but he rallied gamely and not a trace of his agitation escaped to betray him.

"Well, well! that was a most extraordinary thing for Rube Harpy to do—unless, as I suspect, there was a powerful motive back of it all!" he exclaimed, when Nellie had ceased.

"And that motive?" asked Roger Mordaunt.

"Unknown to me, I assure you; however, it

is probable that the two rogues had fallen out, and that Danton was attempting to take the game into his own hands."

"Yes, yes, the evidence seems to point that way," coincided Jackson.

"At all events, if either of the knaves has the temerity to approach us again, he shall certainly be received with a degree of warmth he cannot fail to appreciate," Roger grimly averred.

"He shall, indeed!" declared Royale.

"But I must away now, to the pickets, to learn if all seems quiet."

With the departure of the pretender, the party lapsed into silence.

Just at daybreak, Roger Mordaunt, alarmed at the prolonged absence of Royale, sought Snowflake on the northern border of the motte.

"'Flake!" Mordaunt hailed, from the shelter of the timber, as the negro passed; "where is Royale?"

Halting, 'Flake grounded his rifle, then shook his head as if puzzled by the query.

"Deed I ha'n't de leastest ideer, Mars' Morda'nt!" he replied. "He dun lef' de camp er couple ob hours ago."

Mordaunt, in turn, looked puzzled.

"Mounted?" he asked.

"He was, sah."

"Did he say where he was going—did he leave any word?"

"He said, sah, dat you'd unnerstan', an' dat you need hab no fears on his 'count, sah."

"Didn't say when he would return?"

"No, sah; he merely 'served dat he w'u'd jine de train ter-day or ter-morrer, sah, ef hit was possible, an' den he rode off like de wind."

"He has gone to seek Pauline!" uttered Mordaunt, half-aloud. "A foolhardy move! I gave him credit for better sense!"

"Resky, sho's you's bo'n, sah!" chimed in the negro, catching the low-spoken words.

"But, Mars' Morda'nt, w'en do de trail move?"

"In a half-hour, 'Flake—nothing preventing. To-day will carry us to the end of our journey—the Hidden-Hope Mine."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SHOT FROM THE BRUSH.

ALARMED by the continued absence of Dave Danton, Pauline Mordaunt finally arose from the couch of skins upon which she had been deposited by Three Bears, or Ben Harpy, and with her revolver in readiness for use stole silently to the door of the lodge.

The camp seemed to have been deserted. As a matter of fact, it was practically without life, just then. The squaws and their children, and the dogs, had at the first note of alarm been banished to a series of caves honeycombing the upper walls of the gorge, while the braves, as already noted, had hastened on toward the prairie to form an ambuscade for the supposed foe.

"Shall I await the return of Danton?" mused Pauline, as she peered forth. "May he not have fallen into the hands of the Apaches? It seems an age since he left the lodge."

A decision was speedily reached.

She determined to chance all upon an effort to escape!

The moment seemed most propitious. Not a red-skin in sight—a night of transcendent brilliance and beauty!

Better to chance all the uncertainties of such a venture than to remain there, face to face with a bitter, black fate!

Little she knew the utter futility of an attempt to scale the surrounding cliffs! The secret pass spoken of by Danton surely could not be the only unguarded outlet. There must be clefts and fissures almost without number, and through one of these she could certainly make her way, if the cliffs proved too steep to be scaled.

These thoughts and ideas ran through her brain with feverish rapidity.

With something like a prayer in her heart, she glided out of the lodge, her face cold and white in the gleam of the moonlight.

A moment, then she halted.

Which way should she go? Now that the first step had been taken, the very silence was portentous!

"Hist!"

The sound came from the midst of the shadows to her left. She faced about, trembling with blended hope and fear.

Came the word from friend or foe?

Only an instant, then her doubts were forever put at rest by a well-known voice, saying:

"Hyar, Pauline—quick! It's ther ole man, hisself—Long Pete Jenkins!"

Little need to urge haste! With the flurry of a startled bird, Pauline darted into the friendly shadow!

"Glory!" ejaculated the giant ranger, grasping Pauline's outstretched hands with a fervor eloquent of boundless affection. "I knowed I'd find ye—but sech a windfall!"

"Come—we'll strike a bee-line fer Dan Yuba—ef ye kin stan' ther pressure!"

"Anything—anything, to get away from this place!" breathed Pauline, trembling between excitement and joy.

"Then hyar goes! An' we won't open our talk-traps ag'in till we're out ov ther den. Got

a mighty heap ter tell ye, then! All good—too good ter keep!"

Jenkins led the way, Pauline following with all the stealth she could command.

Keeping as far in the shadows as possible, they skirted the encampment until they had reached the low cliff whereon was perched Dan Yuba.

A slight noise in the undergrowth checked the signal the giant was about to utter.

A single piercing glance in that direction, and the origin of the sound was revealed.

Within less than a dozen paces was a prowling Apache.

"Keep back!" breathed Long Pete, gently pushing Pauline against the cliff. "We'll be shut ov him in a minute."

The words were surely prophetic, for scarcely had they been uttered when a shrill signal rung out a short distance away.

Ben Harpy had recalled his red scouts.

"Thank fortune, I'm saved from that leetle tussle" muttered Jenkins, sheathing his knife as the prowling Apache glided toward the lodges.

"All quiet below?" came the voice of Dan Yuba, low-toned and cautious.

"All quiet, Dan," returned Long Pete. "Drop us yer lariat, an' pull away easy like, fer ye've a dainty cargo!"

The squat Hercules complied, and within a few minutes the happy trio were on their way to the point at which the horses had been left.

"Hark!" exclaimed Jenkins, as a medley of sounds arose in the Apache camp. "I kalkilate ther reptilians hev diskivered that ther bird hes flown!"

"Are we in no danger?" queried Pauline.

"From back thar, no; thar may be a few red-skins scattered thro' the hill, but we're not like ter run ag'in' 'em," returned Jenkins.

"Yuba be pilotin' us straight fer ther horses; an' ef we find them all right, we may laugh et all the 'Paches in the Mimbres."

"An' now, Miss Pauline, let me tell ye that both yer father an' yer lover, Dick Royale, aire at ther train."

"Thank heaven! papa is safe!" ejaculated Pauline. "But tell me, Mr. Jenkins, was Dick hurt in the fight at the camp?"

"Not a scratch," was the prompt avowal. "In fact, yer folkses warn't hurt in the least. They beat off the 'Paches in Bob-royal style!"

Long Pete then narrated the adventures attending his scout toward Dead-Tree Knob, Pauline listening attentively, and in return recounting all that passed during his absence.

Great was the wrath of the giant guide at the treachery of Jose and Pedro.

"Powder an' lead war too good fer 'em!" he asseverated. "They deserved hangin'!"

"But wouldn't I like ter meet that Red-Hand Sport! It's wu'th a year ov eny man's life ter cross hands with a chap like *that*!"

"An' even McBuff, the dandy blacklaig, deserves sum credit fer at last showing up better color. I'd never 'a' thought et ov him!"

And thus conversing, with Dan Yuba several paces in advance, the party pushed forward, making fairly good progress, until the sheen of the moon gave way to the radiance of the sun.

"We'll head straight fer the Hidden Hope," said Jenkins, when they had secured the horses. "The train is now on the way thar, an' likely we'll fall in with it 'fore many hours."

So they mounted and set forward, Yuba leading the extra horse.

At the expiration of an hour, they found themselves in a small, densely-wooded glade, through which coursed a stream of good water. Here they decided to halt and take breakfast from the contents of Yuba's lunch-bag.

Accordingly the horses were watered and picketed for a fifteen-minute graze, after which the two plainsmen and their protegee proceeded to break their fast.

Scarcely had they finished, when they were startled by heavy footfalls in the undergrowth, and the next minute Dave Danton broke into the glade.

What a figure the desperado presented!

His once natty attire rent into ribbons, his face and hands torn and bleeding, hatless, his hair disheveled, his eyes half-closed and blood-shot, he looked the incarnation of distress.

One quick, wild look at the startled group confronting him, then with a choking sort of cry he flung himself upon the ground at Pauline's feet, his hands lifted imploringly.

"Listen!" he cried, his voice hoarse and strained; "you must hear what I have to say! Naught but Fate itself could have thus brought us together!"

"Dick Royal is—

"Great God—too late!"

Following close upon the hiatus came the wild shriek—the crack of a revolver, and the luckless desperado toppled over—to all appearances lifeless.

"Quick, Dan! Thar's reds in the bush!" exclaimed Long Pete, his practiced eye detecting the faint wreath of white smoke marking the position of the author of the dastardly shot. "Cut loose ther hosses! Three's enuff—darn the extra!"

A lively scramble—a rush—and Pauline was

fairly tossed into the saddle; just a breath, then the two pards and their fair charge dashed out of the glade, and away across the plain.

CHAPTER XXIV.

QUEEN MADGE OF THE MIMBRES BANDITS.

WHEN the pretended Dick Royale rode away from the Mordaunt train, the action was not taken without a well-defined purpose.

First of all, he wanted to be to himself for a few hours, for he felt that to keep up the part he had assumed, he must do some tall thinking.

Then, too, chance might lead him across the path of Danton, or of the Red-Hand Sport—two men so thoroughly inimical to his scheme as to excite his deadliest animosity.

As to an attempt to rescue Pauline from the clutches of the renegade Apaches, nothing was so far removed from the thoughts of the desperate adventurer. He was quite willing that Long Pete and Dan Yuba should have the field in that direction.

So he rode along, mile after mile, following the line of the foot-hills, busy with his thoughts, yet on the alert.

Some ten or twelve miles north of the Lone Timber, his course led him into the self-same glade in which Jenkins and his companions, later by a few hours, halted for breakfast.

"It is a capital spot, and here I may as well rest until I have studied it out," mused the desperado, drawing rein and narrowly surveying his surroundings. "No danger of a surprise here, if a fellow takes the commonest precautions."

Dismounting, he sought a snug retreat for his horse, then wrapped himself in his poncho and sat down to meditate, his back to a tree, his pipe between his lips.

For a time, thought followed thought with feverish rapidity; his pipe burned out, and then, ere he was aware of the approach of its vanguard, slumber claimed him.

A stray sunbeam, falling athwart his face, awakened him. A moment he stared around with keen, suspicious eyes, then started sharply as a ripple of laughter penetrated the leafy covert.

Throwing aside the poncho, he gained his feet with a bound.

"A woman, by all that's handsome!" he muttered. "The question is, who can the fair intruder be?"

And drawing his revolver, he glided forward, threading the mazes of the thicket with the stealth of an Indian.

Such a scene as was presented to his wolfish gaze!

Scarcely a rod before him, standing between her gallant rescuers, was the fair Pauline Mordaunt.

Eagerly, yet steadily, the pretender gazed at the face of the beautiful girl, an evil light in his dark orbs.

"She is worth the risk a thousandfold!" he thought, catching his breath hard. "And I will win her, too, come what may!"

A moment more, and then Dave Danton crashed into view, a wild, hunted look on his bloody face, casting himself entreatingly at the feet of Pauline.

Royale's face grew hard and cold; his hand crept up until his revolver was in line with Danton's head.

"If he attempts to reveal even so much as a word, he dies!" he gritted. "Curse him! I warned him not to play the traitor!"

Danton's lips moved; he spoke. At the same instant, as if by some fatal instinct warned of his impending doom, he turned his head; his eyes encountered the luridly-gleaming orbs of his foe.

A shriek of dismay, a shot, and, without waiting to note the result of his dastardly work, the assassin turned and glided swiftly into the depths of the thicket.

Not until he had reached his horse did he pretend to pause, and then only long enough to throw on the saddle, sever the picket-rope, and mount.

"I must get out of this," he muttered, with a savage thrust of his spurs urging his horse toward the adjacent foot-hills. "It would never do for these fellows to get even so much as a glimpse of me."

Gaining the coveted shelter, he halted and listened. Not a sound indicative of pursuit reached his ears.

"That job is done, and well done," he muttered, grimly. "And I think I shall be able to patch up a tale to suit my beautiful Pauline. I have overheard enough to give me the points."

Turning north, he pushed slowly through the fine timber skirting the foot-hills. It was not his intention to proceed far in that direction.

"I will seek a safe retreat a few miles further on, and thence join the train during the afternoon," he mused. "In the mean time, the hours may be very profitably employed in putting together a narrative of this venture."

An hour passed, and then he came upon just such a spot as he had been seeking—a narrow valley, running back among the hills, the sides at times steep and lofty, but generally sloping sharply, and covered with a dense, chaparral-like growth.

Turning into this valley, he rode forward for perhaps a mile, then sought the shelter of a gloomy pass, where he dismounted and tethered his horse.

He then took a closer look at his surroundings.

The place certainly seemed to afford the coveted seclusion.

Yet, scarcely had the pseudo-Royale concluded his survey, when he was startled by a hoarse voice just behind him—a voice saying:

"Hands up, sport! Touch a tool and you die!"

Even as he wheeled, the pretender complied with the pointed request; his eyes were aflame, however, with a light that boded ill to somebody!

Confronting him, at a distance of three paces, was a man—a tall, brawny, deep-chested fellow.

It required no glance at the masked face—at the leveled "six"—to confirm the suspicions aroused by the hail.

The fellow was an outlaw—a road-agent.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded Royale, as much in contempt as aught else.

"Your money—your valuables; so shell out," was the terse reply.

"The why and the wherefore of which?" sneered the pretender.

The outlaw guffawed loudly.

"You are deuced particular, it seems to me!" he exclaimed, in the hoarse tones evidently assumed to disguise his natural voice. "But if you must know, I suppose I shall have to explain.

"You see, you have invaded the domain of good Queen Madge, of the Mimbres Bandits, and so must pay the tax invariably imposed upon such temerity.

"And if that isn't explanation enough, I've a number of diagrams right here that may be had for jest a leetle less than the asking."

And the masked road-agent significantly placed his left forefinger upon the steel cylinder of his leveled "six."

"Thank you—no! I comprehend the situation!" exclaimed Royale, grimly.

"But isn't this pretty tough lines on a fellow-professional?"

The road-agent seemed a trifle staggered at this bit of assurance.

A semi-audible titter ran along the line of bushes just in his rear.

"Permit me to relieve you, Morales," interposed a rich, mellow voice, plainly that of a woman, and forth from the covert glided the speaker.

Startled before, Royale was now astounded.

Before him was Queen Madge, of the Mountain Bandits.

A woman of superb form, set off to splendid advantage by her huntress costume of plain black cloth, and a jaunty hat with waving plumes.

She was armed, too, for in the broad silver sash serving as a girdle, were thrust a pair of as splendid tools as the heart of brigand could wish for.

Her face, like that of her lieutenant, was concealed by the folds of a sable mask; but through the eyelets gleamed a pair of magnificent black orbs—orbs that could be melting in their tenderness or flash fires infernal.

"You may retire, Morales, and leave me to deal with the man," she said, quietly, but in decisive tones. "His face strikes me as being not only familiar, but as one friendly to our cause."

"Certainly, my queen, if such is your wish," and inclining himself profoundly, the road-agent retreated to the covert.

"And you may come with me," continued the chieftainess, turning to the amazed pretender. "Inasmuch as you are covered by a score of my followers, you will probably deem it advisable to succumb with the best grace possible."

"Lead, lady, and I will follow," returned Royale, with a slight bow.

"This distance will suffice," averred Queen Madge, halting at the point twenty-five or thirty paces from that at which she had appeared.

"May I ask your name?"

"Assuredly, madam; but don't you gamble on the returns. In this section a variety in the way of handles seems to be a popular craze. I've known several plain John Smiths to turn up in a camp fifty miles distant with such ornate cognomens as Necktie Nick, Ikey, the Rustler, and so on, grown onto 'em in less than a week."

"But I don't mind telling you that just now I'm called Algernon Fitzgibbon Vincent."

"There, now! it's out! Don't you think the handle a pretty one?"

The woman laughed outright.

"Pretty enough," she answered, suddenly flinging off her mask; "but it is hardly as forcible as plain Rube Harpy used to be!"

A moment the pretender stared hard at the strangely beautiful face thus revealed—started at the swift, impetuous words, his expression changing to one of profound incredulity.

"Madge?"

"Yes, brother—Madge Harpy!"

A brief spell of intense silence. Then their

hands met—that was all. There was no display of affection.

"I thought you were dead!" returned Rube Harpy, the pretender.

"No such luck!" was the bitter response, as the mask fluttered back into place. "But I might almost as well be, I am so thoroughly out of the world!"

"Oh, no; you hadn't anything of the sort; for while there's life there's hope, you know."

"But I'm really surprised at you, Madge! No Harpy ever threw up the sponge, and, if I remember aright, you used to be counted the truest Harpy of them all!"

The woman's eyes kindled with a vindictive light.

"I was not aware that I had given up the battle," she returned, almost fiercely. "You have certainly misconstrued my language. I referred simply to how irksome to one fond of social pleasures and gayety is the life I am now leading."

"As for hope, that was crushed out, years ago, when he played me false."

"And yet, I have not lived without a certain fixed and unalterable purpose. I have ever felt that at some time would come a chance for revenge, an opportunity to repay the indignities heaped upon myself and lavished upon our father."

"I came not here to seek it, but within these hills it has pressed itself upon me."

"I see—I see!" muttered Rube, with an appreciative nod. "Go ahead, sis."

"As you are probably aware, these hills offer nothing to a band such as I command, unless it be a snug retreat when hard pressed," pursued the woman, "and that is precisely why we are here."

"We came two weeks ago; hard pushed by a company of blue-coats under Captain Dale, and sought refuge in a huge cavern a few miles distant."

"The morning after our arrival, my scouts reported that we were not alone in the hills—that within a mile of us was a strongly-built log house, occupied by a number of men."

"This house was ever guarded, as was its adjacent buildings, and for some days we were greatly puzzled as to the secret of the place, so zealously kept."

"Then, one of my most daring fellows, Lieutenant Morales, learned all."

"The men were working away on a vast, isolated deposit of virgin gold—had taken out vast sums in the yellow metal."

"Naught but the presence of Captain Dale and his company in these hills held us in restraint; but we have kept up our surveillance, and have learned enough to hold the winning cards."

"Now, as to the most singular part of the affair."

"The chief of the party is none other than our old friend, Jackson Mordaunt."

"Sometime within the next few hours, he will pass through the valley just below us, accompanied by his daughter and other near relatives."

"Revenge and riches at one stroke?" suggested Rube.

"Exactly! For we have determined to seize the outfit, despite the presence of the blue-coats in the vicinity!"

"Is it not a royal stroke?"

"Royal, but rash," was the cool response.

"Now, listen to me, Madge, for I have something to propose."

"Very well; proceed."

But just at that juncture a faint signal arose from the covert, and Queen Madge warily placed her hand upon her brother's arm, while she cast a swift look up and down the pass.

Approaching from below was a most singular looking cavalcade.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BROOD OF THE BRANDED VIPER.

WITH the return of consciousness, Old Duke Harpy lifted himself upon his elbow and glared savagely up and down the secret pass.

The first object to catch his eye was the form of his son, Ben Harpy, perched upon a stone jutting from the wall.

"Oh, you're there, are you?" snarled the old chief, leaping to his feet. "Do you know, Ben Harpy, that I've been scientifically taken in and done for?"

"Fully aware of the fact!" was the cool reply. "In fact, pap, I have found the document that led you astray, and I feel that I may say, that, badly as you have been hoodwinked, I would have fared as hardly had I stood in your boots."

"Oh, that Danton is a sleek citizen, and if I ever get him into my hands, he'll rue the day that gave him birth!"

"But it wasn't the paper that led me into the trap," declared Duke Harpy, gingerly tracing the extent of the contusion created by the butt of the Red-Hand Sport's revolver. "I detected the forgery the moment I put eyes upon it. Forced into the conviction that you had in some manner been bested, I made a pretense of

falling into the trap, as a *ruse* to catch the cursed sharp!"

"And got bitten for your pains!"

"Not by *him*, at any rate," with an oath. "I had him, fast enough, right here, when I was stricken down from behind."

"And the Mordaunt girl—was she with him?" eagerly queried the son.

"No; has she escaped?"

"I feared so. I did not take time to visit her lodge before putting out after you," and Ben Harpy went on to narrate the particulars of his capture and strange release.

"We had better get back to the camp," declared the old chief, when the brief recital was ended. "Your mysterious rescuer may be creating havoc there, while we are not helping matters any by remaining here. With ten of the best trailers in the band at their heels, Danton and the other fellow will scarcely have the time to venture back this way."

Ben Harpy assenting, the two hastened down into the pocket.

A glance into the lodge where Pauline had been confined, confirmed their fears as to a rescue.

"What is to be done?" exclaimed Duke Harpy, in perplexity.

"Absolutely nothing!" was the cool reply. "Let her escape, say I! She will be taken back to her friends, and so is well off our hands."

"We must bend our energies in another direction. We must leave these thieving Apaches to their own devices."

"I am agreed," acquiesced the chief. "We had better hasten, too, for morning is not so far distant."

"We can pull through all right, with a little systematic work."

"But the treasure—of course—you know—we can't leave—"

"Of course not. The accumulations of three years left to these thieving red-skins! I've emptied the treasure-cave, sack at a time, replacing them with dummy-bags, in anticipation of just such a move. It is all securely *cached*, half a mile beyond the outlet of the secret pass."

For a moment Old Duke Harpy was dumb with amazement and admiration. Then he broke forth in a choking sort of laugh.

"Sly dog!" he ejaculated, rapping the shoulders of his villainous son approvingly. "If ever father were exactly reproduced in son, you are the boy!"

"Acting upon the same reasons, I've carted away the dummies!"

Ben Harpy, in tone, was astonished; but he quickly joined in his father's laughter.

"Won't there be some tall howling when the empty cave is discovered?" exclaimed the elder.

"It was not to be expected that we lead the red-thieves for nothing," declared Ben.

"But let us hasten. We must cut out the necessary horses and put ourselves in presentable shape as speedily as possible."

In less than an hour they had reached the outlet of the secret pass, with six horses in their possession.

Their appearance was so changed that they were unrecognizable. A liberal use of water and a change to civilized garb had wrought a complete metamorphosis.

In due course they arrived at the spot where the treasure lay hidden, and without loss of time the *cache* was emptied of its precious contents, a load of two sacks being placed upon each of the four pack-horses.

"The question now is, where shall we go, and what shall we do?" observed Old Duke Harpy, as they remounted. "In our present guise, I am in mortal terror, for we are in danger from every red-skin and white outlaw that may chance to be in the hills."

"As am I," frankly avowed Ben. "But if we can keep our skirts clear for a few hours, I think we can gain a point where we may feel perfectly safe."

"It is a cavern, located a little west of north, and can be reached in four or five hours, even at a leisurely pace."

"As to what we shall do, that is another question, and must be decided by the way in which events shape themselves."

"For my own part, I am in favor of spying out the location of the Mordaunt Mine, and then putting ourselves in communication with Rube."

"That is about my idea," Duke Harpy declared. "But just where in these hills such a fabulous mine could be located is a sad puzzle to me."

"It is here, nevertheless, and somewhere to the northward, I think."

And gathering up the reins, Ben Harpy set forward.

For hours the villainous pair rode onward at a steady gait, eventually turning almost due west into a small valley, and thence, a mile further on, into the jaws of a narrow, tortuous pass.

"We are nearing the cave," suggested Duke Harpy.

"We are within rifle-shot of the entrance," Ben returned, with a yawn. "My first act,

after a bite to eat, will take the form of a long nap. I haven't been so used up for a month."

"Nor I," declared the ex-chief.

Rube Harpy joined his sister, the Bandit Queen, in a start of surprise as his eyes encountered the approaching party.

It was a singular one, to say the least.

First came two horsemen, fashionably attired and freshly shaved.

Behind them, four pack-horses, each with a brace of large, well-filled sacks strapped securely upon its back.

That the two riders were wholly unsuspecting of the presence in the pass of any one other than themselves was obvious; in fact, they were giving little or no heed to their surroundings.

"Come," cautiously uttered Queen Madge, plucking at Rube's sleeve. "Get under cover. The Bandits must have that train, as it doubtless contains much-needed supplies."

Rube Harpy lost no time in complying with the request. A glance showed him that his horse had been gotten out of sight.

Crouching beside his sister, the desperado watched the approach of the strangers with curious eyes.

It required but a moment for them to ride into the ambush. Morales, the bandit lieutenant, again stepped forth from the covert, a revolver raised in either hand.

"Ho, gentlemen!" he exclaimed, as he covered the startled pair. "Will you surrender, or do you choose to die?"

The expression that came over the faces of Old Duke Harpy and his son, Ben, at that juncture, was such as to baffle description.

It portrayed, at once, chagrin, fear and rage.

The muzzles of a number of rifles protruding from the bushes, however, suggested the utter folly of an attempt at resistance, and, roundly cursing their ill-fortune, the two desperadoes yielded.

At that juncture Queen Madge attempted to gain her feet, but sunk back, weak and trembling.

A ghastly pallor had crept into her face, a strange, wild light into her magnificent eyes. Her full red lips twitched piteously as she vainly strove to speak.

Nor was her villainous brother a whit less powerfully affected.

The appearance of the two strangers had upon them just such an effect as would have been produced by the sudden uprising of a grim-visaged phantasm.

Then, as Old Duke Harpy dismounted, Madge threw off the terrible thrall and sprung to her feet, crying:

"Hold, Morales! Touch them not!

"They are my father and my brother!"

As the Bandit Queen spoke, she flung aside her mask and with a peculiarly serpentine motion glided forward, closely followed by Rube.

One swift, startled look at her white, tensely drawn face, and Old Duke Harpy sprang back, then let out a yell that would have done credit, in a vocal way to the wildest, lustiest Apache in the country 'round.

"Good Lord! It is Madge—our Madge—and alive!" he screamed, half-frantic with joy and relief, his ruddy countenance flushing and paling by turns, as he recovered himself and sprung forward.

"Alive, yes! And with her, Rube!" supplemented Ben Harpy, scarcely less agitated.

And thus met the four members of the Harpy family, known as the Brood of the Branded Viper.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NELLIE'S SUSPICIONS—THE GOAL.

IT was with no small degree of uneasiness that Jackson Mordaunt and Nellie learned of the surreptitious departure of Rube Harpy, or, as he was known to them, Dick Royale.

"It is certainly a most foolhardy move," asseverated Jackson, when Roger had made his report. "And yet—it is not to be wondered at!"

"On the contrary, it was to have been expected," Nellie declared. "A lover capable of bearing arms would hardly supinely await the rescue of his affianced by other hands."

"A poor stick if he would," admitted Jackson. "I only hope that he may pull through his rash venture unhurt."

"Trust him for that," observed the girl. "I incline to the belief that Mr. Dick Royale is fully competent to look out for Number 1."

Roger Mordaunt looked keenly at his daughter.

"There is more in that remark than appears on the surface," he assured himself. "Nellie suspects something. I must learn what it is at the earliest opportunity. She's a shrewd puss—generally not far wrong."

Then aloud:

"We may at least hope that he will fall in with Jenkins and Yuba, and that the trio will be successful."

"But I would suggest, Jackson, that we have breakfast and get under way as speedily as possible, in accordance with the instructions left by Jenkins."

"I was about to offer the same idea," declared

Roger. "In fact, the sooner we are under way the better. The march onward will be a relief, to say the least."

"How are the horses this morning?" Nellie asked.

Roger Mordaunt started.

"I had forgotten their lameness!" he exclaimed. "Doubtless they are all right this morning, as the irritation produced by McBuff's jugglery was likely intended to be only temporary."

"If they are unfit for work, fill their places from Yuba's Apache herd," said Jackson. "Anything to pull through to-day."

In due time, the train got under way, pushing northward across the plain lying east of the foot-hills, and leaving in the mottled three horses as yet unable to travel.

Not until the sun was almost to the meridian did Roger Mordaunt find an opportunity to approach his daughter concerning the subject weighing so heavily upon his mind.

Then the two met in the rear of the train, beyond earshot of the rest of the party.

"Papa, I wish to ask you a question," exclaimed Nellie, as Roger rode up, and I would like a candid answer.

"What do you think of this fellow styling himself Richard Royale?"

"Eh?"

Nellie repeated the question.

For a full minute her father stared hard at her, making an attempt to conceal his amazement.

"Such a question!" he gasped, at length. "Why do you ask it, my dear?"

"Because I should like an answer, papa."

"Logical—very," and Mordaunt smiled at his daughter's intense earnestness.

"But, Nellie, to be candid, I have not fully made up my mind what to think; and, to be equally candid, it was to learn your opinion that I sought you here."

"My opinion, papa!"

"Yes, and your suspicions, as well."

"They are yours for the asking," said Nellie, repressing a start of surprise.

"I suspect that the gentleman introducing himself as Richard Royale is none other than Reuben Harpy!"

The effect of this announcement upon Roger Mordaunt was not so pronounced as might have been expected.

He simply nodded, then smiled grimly, saying.

"Exactly! And your reasons for such a suspicion, my dear?"

"They are many, and too intricate to be set forth just here, papa."

"But if I am wrong, Dick Royale has greatly changed, and not for the better, either."

"I agree with you there. In fact, it may be said that he has hardened almost beyond recognition."

"Then, too," pursued Nellie, "the marvelous likeness that existed between the two men would make such an imposture possible."

"It would, indeed," acquiesced Roger Mordaunt.

"To tell the truth, Nellie, my suspicions run in much the same channel that yours have marked out."

"And Uncle Jackson, papa?"

"As yet wholly unsuspecting. As a matter of fact, he is too intensely wrought up by the uncertainty of Pauline's fate to have more than merely noticed Royale."

"So, Nell, we will let the matter stand as a secret between us. If the fellow turns out to be Royale, no harm will have been done; and, on the other hand, if it becomes evident that his representations are false, he will be taken by surprise."

To this proposition the girl readily agreed, and then Roger Mordaunt rode forward to rejoin his brother.

"I wished Pauline were here," mused Nellie, sighing. "I have scarcely a doubt that Jenkins will succeed. I have actually come to believe that man invincible."

"When Pauline comes, this pretender will not be far behind her. If he deceives her, then will he be perfect, indeed, in the difficult role he has selected."

But the day wore to a close, almost, without the reappearance of any of the missing parties. About the middle of the afternoon the train arrived at the entrance of the little valley, up which we have seen Rube, Ben and Old Duke Harpy take their way, and Jackson Mordaunt said:

"We should arrive at the mine before sunset, for it is now not more than five miles distant. You have arrived at the final turning-point in your long journey."

"But before we proceed, we must make a reconnaissance, as these hills are at present infested by a lawless band known as the Goldites, or Mimbres Bandits, and it is barely possible that their scouts may have had an eye on our movements during the day."

"These Goldites are in hiding from a company of cavalry now somewhere in the hills, but as such a train is tempting, and they are unusually strong, their cupidity may have gotten the better of their judgment."

"Then we may look for an ambush?" Roger asked.

"It would be just as well for us to be on the alert," was the guarded reply. "However, a look at our surroundings will probably yield us something on which to base our conclusions."

With that, Jackson Mordaunt rode away, crossing and recrossing the narrow valley.

When he returned, it was with a nervous haste that led Roger to expect the worst.

"There is a strong likelihood that my fears are well-founded," announced Jackson, as he drew rein. "A number of fresh trails lead up the valley."

"But, get the negroes into shape for an encounter, and we will push forward, as it would avail us nothing to halt here."

"I will ride ahead. At the first intimation of danger, draw the wagons into a triangle and take shelter behind them."

And touching spurs to his horse, Jackson Mordaunt sought a position some three hundred yards in advance of them, while Roger turned his attention to Snowflake and his sable comrades.

Contrary to general expectations, however, nothing occurred further to mar the peace and quiet of the little party.

In fact, the valley and its environs seemed wholly deserted, save for their presence.

In due course, Jackson Mordaunt turned from the valley into a deep gorge, into which the wagons proceeded with no little difficulty.

Not until then did the vigilance of the miners relax. Halting, he waited until Roger and Nellie came up.

"We are now within less than the fourth of a mile of the Hidden-Hope Mine," he announced, as they drew near. "The dangerous points may safely be said to have been passed, and I now bid you welcome—a welcome marred by but a single pain!"

His voice grew husky and tremulous, as he extended a hand to each, the mist of unshed tears dimmed the brightness of his eyes.

His agony had at last grown beyond restraint.

Nellie turned pale and silently averted her face.

Roger, suffering as keenly, perhaps, as either, was about to speak, when his woe-begone expression suddenly changed to one of joyous relief.

"Look!" he cried. "Banish pain—let all be joy—for yonder comes Pauline!"

True enough; with the swift, ringing clatter of iron-clad hoofs, the frenzied waving of red bandanas and the feeble fluttering of a dainty linen kerchief—followed at a distance of fifty yards by a deputation of three brawny, red-shirted miners afoot—came Long Pete Jenkins and Dan Yuba, one on either side of Pauline Mordaunt.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE PRAIRIE GRAVE.

"He is a fiend as black and wicked as any the infernal regions could put forth, I verily believe—the Old Boy barreled!"

"But with all his deathless hatred, with all his devilish ingenuity, he has failed again and I yet live—live to follow the trail to the bitter end, to frustrate his evil design!"

And Desperate Dave Danton staggered weakly to his feet, his midnight eyes aglow, his face pale and bloody but rigid and determined.

"That was a close call," he muttered, running his fingers along the edges of a gaping furrow across his forehead. "I was lucky enough to get a glimpse of him skulking there in the bush, or it would have been all up with me! A close call—but I'm better than a dozen dead men!"

A hasty scrutiny of his surroundings, and then the wounded desperado deliberately set to work, to wash away the bloody stains and dress his wounds as best he could.

In due time he accomplished his painful task, then mounted the extra horse abandoned by Jenkins and his companions in their hasty departure, and rode slowly out of the glade.

"Now, what is to be done?" he muttered, halting at the outer border of the timbers. "Shall I seek the trail of Pauline and her rescuers, or turn back to Colorado and strike from that quarter?

"The first course is by far the shorter, but is infinitely more perilous; and as I am growing weary of this continuous race against death, I will abandon it and adopt the latter, thus striking from under cover and constantly confronting Harpy with the man he believes dead."

So striking spurs to his horse, Danton rode swiftly across the plain, heading to the southeast.

"I will find the Mordaunt trail, and follow it back to the town of Alamosa, for I care not to go adrift, almost unassured, in a country so overrun with outlaws and red-skins," he muttered.

The sun had reached the meridian when he came upon the trail at a point a mile east of the Lone Timber.

"Now, easy, good horse, for there is not for you either night or day until we have struck the Iron Trail," he exclaimed, drawing down to an easy lope.

Thus two miles slipped by, and then Danton was startled by a stern hail—ringing out from the grass a few paces to the south of the trail—the three words:

"Halt—hands up!"

The desperado's first impulse was to risk a bold dash; but a swift glance in the direction of the enemy brought in its train a sober second thought.

Such an object as was presented to his gaze!

Truly, it was startling enough to have tested the nerves of the boldest!

Kneeling in a shallow grave—from which he had evidently just exhumed himself—his hair and beard matted, his clothing covered with clinging particles of dirt, his face the hue of the dead, his eyes wild and bloodshot, glaring along the sight of his rifle, was a man—a burly, broad-shouldered fellow—in the garb of the plains!

Big Dale Keith!

Again had Harpy, the pretender, failed in his purpose.

"Good! That's sensible!" growled the wounded plainsman, as Danton came to a halt with his hands uplifted.

"Now, pardy, which way d'ye come?"

"From the foot-hills, back there," replied Danton, with well-defined uneasiness.

"Did, eh? Wal, look'e hyar—d'ye see enything ov a train ov three wagons?"

"I did; it encamped in a timber clump a few miles northwest of here, last night."

"An' whar may it be now?"

"I don't know."

Big Dale was silent a moment; his eyes were fixed steadily upon Danton's face.

"Pardy!" he finally exclaimed, "I'm goin' ter trust ye. Jest a leetle furder than I like, bein' es I'm so situated es I cain't help myself, ye know."

Danton nodded, saying:

"Yes, yes; you're down, and I'm not begrudging you a lift. What is it, pard?"

"Fu'st, though," pursued Big Dale, "we'll explainify a leetle—you on your side, an' me on mine."

"Now, my name is Keith—Dale Keith—an' I am one ov ther outfit ahead. I was ambushed an' shot down last night, an' planted in this hyar hole—es mean an' dirty a leetle trick es war ever served on man, take it all in all."

"For ther cur es did ther job war a feller es I hed treated es a friend—hed piloted 'crost memmy a mile ov plain ter meet his sweetheart."

Danton turned a trifle paler.

"His name?" he asked, his voice unsteady in his eagerness.

"He interjuiced hisself ter me es Dick Royale, but, es I've sence l'arned, he's better known by ther name ov Monshall."

Throwing himself from the saddle, Danton impulsively sprung forward.

"Stiddy, lad—stiddy!" warned Big Dale in incisive accents. "Ye may mean well enough—but I don't know it."

Thus brought to a halt, the desperado pushed back his sombrero and pointed significantly to the handkerchief bound around his head.

"More work of that devil's imp!" he grimly exclaimed. "In my case, though, by his baste he cheated himself of the satisfaction of seeing me decently planted."

A light seemed to break through the clouded brain of the wounded plainsman. Back to him came the words of Dick Brazzleton.

"Associated with Monshall in the murder of Royale and in the evil scheme subsequently put afoot, was a second rascal, fully as dangerous, known as Desperate Dave."

"Your name, pardner?" he demanded, visibly suspicious.

"Dave Danton."

"Desperate Dave?"

"I have been so called."

"Then ye deserves ter die, fer ye war one ov ther two men who murdered ther real Royale."

"Say yer prayers, ye red-handed scoundrel! I've no mercy on sich as ye!"

Loud and clear as the blare of a bugle rung the voice of the plainsman, and his eyes flamed with a deadly light.

Danton, however, stood his ground without flinching, saying:

"Hold, just a minute, Keith."

"Who told you that?"

Something in the man's voice or bearing seemed to have the desired effect—an abatement of burly Dale Keith's almost ungovernable fury. And yet, the lines of his face did not relax as he replied:

"Dick Brazzleton, Royale's old pard."

"The Red-Hand Sport!" Danton ejaculated.

"Ye know 'im, then?"

"Yes; he is straight goods, too, I think—more than can be said of the general run of self-styled man-hunters."

"Ye pleads guilty?"

"Yes, and no; guilty, perhaps, under the law, to a certain extent, but in reality not guilty at all!"

"It is true that I was with Monshall at the moment the shooting occurred; and it is equally true that I was as anxious as he, just then, to see the detective wiped out."

"For he had us in a tight box—crowded to the wall—and it was almost his life or ours."

"Monshall had obtained possession of a letter from Miss Pauline Mordaunt to Royale, detailing the discovery of the Hidden-Hope Mine, and telling of its wonderful richness; and it was while we were reading this letter and formulating a scheme to obtain possession of the mine that we were surprised by Royale."

"He had crept up behind a great bowlder lying near the verge of a precipice, and had the drop on us when we discovered his presence."

"Desperate, caught like rats in a trap, what more natural than to show fight?"

"We had but one revolver between us, and Monshall carried that—unknown to me. An exchange of shots followed, and Royale went down behind the bowlder."

"I can't see but ye're guilty!" interrupted Big Dale, at that point. "Ter my mind, ye war jest as much a party ter ther murder as ef ye'd 'a' hed a dozen we'pins!"

"But there was no murder!" protested Danton, with intense earnestness. "Royale was not killed!"

Big Dale turned yet paler.

"Git out!" he ejaculated, in strains scarcely above a whisper.

"It is a gospel fact!" Danton asseverated. "I pushed around the bowlder to note the effect of the shot. Royale was lying on his back, at the verge of the cliff, insensible, having received an ugly scalp-wound."

"No matter as to my first impulse—a touch of my foot would have sent him to the rocks three hundred feet belw! Strange as it may seem, I took him from his perilous position, placing him in the shadow of the overhanging bowlder, then, with one of his revolvers, re-turned to Monshall, stating that Royale had gone over the cliff, and that I had found the weapon on the verge."

"Pardner, thet aire a purty tough yarn," remarked Big Dale, as Danton paused.

"It may seem almost incredible," the desperado admitted; "but it is as near the exact truth as I can put it."

"To resume: Monshall, whose real name is Harpy—Rube Harpy—and who is really a cousin of Royale, and to all appearances his exact counterpart, on being told that Royale was dead, at once decided to adopt the scheme he had had in view."

"So he took the name of Richard Royale and left Colorado for New Mexico, determined to palm himself off on the Mordaunts, marry Miss Pauline, and eventually secure possession of the fabulous mine."

"We were hand-in-glove in the matter, until the persistent attentions of this Brazzleton, the Red-Hand Sport, brought about a difference of opinion, which eventuated in an open rupture."

"Monshall, or Harpy, went his way, and I went mine—he to carry out his original plot, I to capture the two girls and hold them for ransom."

"In this, I was baffled by Brazzleton, the Red-Hand Sport," and Danton recounted briefly his adventures, from the attack by himself and the two Mexicans upon the Mordaunt party, up to his meeting with Big Dale.

"An' ye kalkilate ter go back ter Colorado and find Royale?" the latter asked, after a moment's silence.

"There is where I'm bound," was the reply.

"It is as much as my life is worth to proceed single-handed, for between the three Harpies on one side and the Red-Hand Sport on the other, my chances would be just about *nil*."

"Thet's yer move," readily agreed Big Dale.

"In fact, I'm goin' with ye!"

"You!" ejaculated Danton.

"I'm ther hairpin," was the laconic response.

"Good!" and a flush of hopefulness came into the desperado's face. "The Red-Hand Sport can hold Harpy level until we return."

"He jest kin," supplemented Dale; "and two kin find Royale quicker nor one."

"Now, I'll jest call up my hoss, and ef ye'll give me a light we'll git back ter ther motte whar ther party camped last night, fer I need a little fixin' up."

"Mind ye, pardy, I'm tryin' jest es much es I know how ter b'lieve ye, an' I'm a-goin' ter trust ye jest es fur es I kin, fer ye look derned honest, jest now."

"Ef I find that ye hev bin chuckin' a cobweb at me, howsumever, or ef ye tries ter play double with me, why I'll crack yer purty white neck—jest es sure es I'm goin' ter crack Rube Harpy's one ov these days! Ye hear me, now!"

Danton nodded, saying:

"No danger of either, old man; I'm done with crooked paths. If I pull through this job, I'm going straight home. I've an old mother down in Little Rhody."

"Good enough! Ef that's yer trail, we're straight out pards till the round-up ov ther Harpy herd. Yer hand on't!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CHANGE OF PLANS.

PLACING his fingers to his lips, Big Dale Keith uttered a shrill whistle, whereupon his horse arose from the tall grass a few rods to the south and cantered to his side.

"Now that's a critter as kin be depended on," exclaimed the plainsman, as he slowly scrambled out of the shallow grave. "Naixt ter Pete Jenkins an' Dan Yuba, that hoss aire the truest critter top ov sod!"

"Now, pard, jest give me a leetle h'ist to'ard ther saddle. I'm powerful weak, I am. Seems as ef ther dirty cuss hed let daylight clär through me."

Danton gave the required assistance, and then the two rode slowly across the plain toward the timber clump.

On the way, Big Dale related his adventure with the Red-Hand Sport, telling how he had been ambushed later on, shot from the saddle and buried as dead.

"Ther bullet come from ther Harpy, too, fer by ther flash ov his we'pin I sighted his face off in ther grass," he declared. "An' ef ther hoss hadn't shied, ther grave back thar would 'a' answere fer all time, too!"

"But Harpy overreached hisself. I s'pose I hed fainted, an' he jest planted me fer dead. It wa'n't a ginoine plantin', uther, else I'd 'a' staid thar fer keeps, but jest a loose permiscus kiverin', piled on in a hurry, an' at ther fu'st move I jist poked my head right through ther roof ov my sepulcher."

"Dern 'im enyway, fer a sneakin' kiote! I'm most sorry I promised Brazzleton ter keep my hands off!"

"I'm under no such promise," said Danton, with a grim smile. "Maybe I'll get a good square chance at him one of these days, with no advantage on either side."

Arrived at the motte, the two men halted at the spot where Mordaunt's three wagons had been drawn into a triangle.

"Look a leetle out, pard!" exclaimed Big Dale, warily, as they were preparing to dismount. "I see three or four hosses out there, to'ard ther plain. Likely we ain't the only ones in the timber."

"We'll scout forward a bit," suggestsd Danton. "It may be reds, or it may be some of Mordaunt's folks."

"Or jest stray critters," Dale said. "Leastways, they ain't picketed."

The move was duly accomplished, and the last supposition found to be correct. Three horses all lame and travel-worn, were grazing just within the bounds of the timber.

"But I glimpsed a fourth," remarked the plainsman, peering into the bushes. "Oh, that's ther critter!"

True enough; and at that juncture the animal in question walked slowly out into the open.

A cry of surprise came from Big Dale, to be caught up and echoed by Danton.

Bound to the back of the horse, Mazeppa-like, was a man!

And that man, as was to be seen at a glance, was the Red-Hand Sport.

His face bore upon it the hue of death, and his form seemed cold and rigid.

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Big Dale; "it is a corpse—the corpse of Dick Brazzleton."

"It certainly is the Red-Hand Sport," Danton affirmed, riding forward. "But it remains to be seen whether he is dead. For my own part, I incline to the belief that there is yet life in him."

"He has fallen into the hands of Harpy's Apache outlaws, been bound thus to his horse, and then, accidentally or otherwise, has taken the ride of a Mazeppa."

"In any event, he has fared roughly, and our first duty is to look to him."

"Ef that's a chainte, sail in," exclaimed Big Dale. "Es fur es I'm consarned, all I'm able ter do is ter look arter ther hosses. Ther real work falls ter you."

A brief examination convinced Danton that his first surmise, at least, was correct. The Red-Hand Sport was simply unconscious.

"He's had a rougher experience than I'd care to undergo," the desperado remarked, as he bent over the detective a few minutes later. "Blessed if his wrists and his ankles aren't as raw as an egg, not to mention a network of bruises and scratches extending from his head to his heels."

A faint smile wreathed the pallid face of the Red-Hand Sport, and his eyes suddenly opened.

"You are right, Danton. I have fared roughly since we parted over there in the hills," he declared in a low tone. "The Apaches were too much for me—capturing me at the very moment I reached my horse."

And that was all either said just then.

The two wounded men were speedily made as comfortable as possible, and then it was decided to take an hour's rest in the motte.

During that time a general understanding was secured, as a result of which the Red-Hand Sport, singularly enough, promptly announced a determination not to put Danton under arrest.

"I certainly believe your story of the attempted assassination of Royale," he declared. "In fact, I may say that I now possess positive proof that you have told the exact truth as to your connection with that affair."

"I may go even further: I may say that Royale is alive—that he is in the immediate vicinity, and that he will confront Rube Harpy before that worthy is many hours older!"

Danton and Big Dale exchanged a glance of amazement.

"Ye war mistaken, then, last night?" asked the plainsman. "Ye know, ye said Royale war dead."

"I was laboring under a delusion."

"Hev ye see'd him?"

"Yes, and no—that is, I have seen that I was mistaken."

A question seemed to be trembling upon the lips of Danton; but he repressed it, and with a peculiar gleam in his eye he moved forward and extended his hand.

"I am glad to hear that, Brazzleton," he said, his voice franght with significance. "It saves me that trip to Colorado, for I suppose Royale will turn up—when he is wanted!"

"It is to be expected that he will," admitted the Red-Hand Sport, accepting the proffered hand.

"And you say Pauline Mordaunt escaped, or was rescued, Danton?"

"Yes, sir; she was with two of the scouts belonging to the Mordaunt outfit at the time of Harpy's attempt to kill me."

"They war Jenkins an' Dan Yuba, pard," averred Big Dale, who, for a few minutes past, had seemed wholly at sea. "Ye kin 'pend on that, fer ther descripsun will fit no other two men in ther Territory."

"But see hyar, pard. hedn't we better decide w'ot we're goin' ter do? I think I kin stand ther saddle, ef we take it slow an' easy a leetle ways."

"We'll follow the wagon-trail," answered Royal Richard, derisively. "The sooner we are off the better, too."

In due time the three were in the saddle, following the plainly-marked trail at an easy speed.

Big Dale rode with grimly-compressed lips, for his wound was painful, though not dangerous. Not once during the afternoon did he speak unless directly addressed.

As for Royal Richard, the torture he suffered must have been excruciating; but, if so, he endured it without a groan—even lightly.

Sunset found the three well back in the foothills.

"We're within a few miles ov ther Hidden Hope," said Dale, in reply to a question from the Red-Hand Sport. "It'll take less'n an hour ter make ther rifle."

"The wagons are not far in advance of us," observed Danton. "The trail has steadily freshened."

"They hev reached the mine afore now," Dale averred.

Just at that point the valley narrowed and made a sharp curve to the northward; and as the trio swept swiftly around the angle thus formed, forth from the deepening shadows of the rocks on either side darted a file of men, masked and armed, blocking the way with their leveled rifles.

"Halt!" commanded a tall fellow, visibly the leader of the party, as he took a position a few paces in advance of the line. "Halt! You are prisoners, my fine birds, for escape you cannot!"

"By heavens, he speaks the truth!" the Red-Hand sport exclaimed, casting a glance over his shoulder. "We are completely hemmed in!"

A muttered curse from his companions attested their appreciation of the fact.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AT THE MINE—THE BROOD IN COUNCIL.

THE reunion of the Mordaunts was a most happy one, and Long Pete and Yuba, despite their efforts to escape at the last moment, came in for a full share of affectionate attention, for their part in bringing about the sudden transition from gloom to gladness was such as not to be overlooked, even at that moment, by Jackson and Roger Mordaunt and their daughters.

"We owe more than life to you, Pete Jenkins, and you, Dan Yuba," warmly avowed Jackson, as, with Pauline, he turned to the two frontiersmen.

"As, indeed, do we," Roger declared, as he and Nellie pressed forward. "Such a debt as you have placed upon us is one that we can never pay. Our only resource is to offer you the widest measure of affection and esteem."

"I declar', folks, ye kinder flustrate me—ye do now," exclaimed Long Pete, laughingly.

"Hey, Dan?"

"Hain't felt so mean fer twenty year," averred the squat Hercules, retreating in confusion.

"Ther fact is, folks, we hain't done eny more fer ye then the law allows, I reckon," pursued Long Pete. "Ye see, sech doin's as we hev hed lately don't count fer much with Dan an' me, an' ef ye'll jest let the matter drop we'll hurry up ter ther mine an' hev a bite ter eat, for I c'u'd eat a wolf, I'm so hungry."

"But hyar's ther jedge, Blue Dan an' Billy Mason, jest a-dyin' ter take ye by ther hand."

The men alluded to at that moment stepped forward, while Long Pete and Yuba turned and rode on up the pass.

"Pard, that war a narrer escape," ejaculated the Giant Ranger, glancing over his shoulder.

"Paches warn't a sarcumstance; but, arter all,

et wouldn't hev bin sech a onpleasant way ter 'a' cashed in."

"W'ot wouldn't?" grunted Yuba.

"Why, bein' hugged ter death by thet crowd back thar. Tell ye w'ot, Dan Yuba, they is darned nice gals, both ov 'em."

"Spruce es eny, I reckon," was the dreamy response.

"Ya-as, I allow so; now, ef I war a bit younger, an' a mite harnsumer, Dan Yuba, d'ye know w'ot I'd do?"

The squat Hercules looked up as if aroused from a reverie.

"W'at's thet? No, I don't set up to be a mind reader, Pete Jenkins," he said. "But I know w'at I'd do!"

"Wa-al," drawled Jenkins, with a peculiar sparkle in his light blue eyes: "wa-al, I'd jest set my cap an' do my purtiest ter capturvate one ov them gals—I w'u'd, by hokey!"

"You!" ejaculated Yuba, with a laugh that set the echoes ringing. "Wa-al, Pard Pete, I was jest kalkilatin' es how I'd do thet same thing!"

Then Jenkins's rollicking guffaw mingled with that of his friend, and a moment later the two halted at their destination—the Hidden-Hope Mine.

All that marked the location of the treasure deposit was a strongly-built log house of two stories—the upper projecting about four feet on all sides—surrounded by a stockade.

The house had been built on a plateau in the western side of the pass, and the face of an overhanging bluff formed the rear wall of the stockade.

When the two plainmen had gained the level of the plateau, they dismounted and seated themselves upon a boulder to await the coming of the Mordaunts.

But scarcely had they thus settled themselves into a comfortable position when the very spirit of unrest seemed to seize upon Long Pete.

A moment, then his rifle swung to his shoulder. The report was followed by a yell of defiance far up the eastern slope of the pass, while a man was seen to spring from behind a small clump of bushes and dart into the recesses of an extensive thicket.

"A spy!" ejaculated Dan Yuba.

"Jest so—bin a-watchin' him fur two minutes an' a hafe. He war thar fer no good, and so I dropped him thet leetle hint ter vamose," responded Long Pete.

"But hyar comes Jackson, an' b'gosh! he looks skeery."

True enough; Jackson Mordaunt at that moment appeared on the plateau, looking pale and agitated.

"A Goldite spy, boss," uttered Dan Yuba, anticipating his employer's question, just as the remainder of the party rode up. "He was prowlin' along ther slope over thar ontill Pete invited him ter cl'ar out."

Mordaunt's look of concern deepened.

"A Goldite spy!" he echoed. "This matter is fast becoming serious. We must try to put a stop to the annoying espionage of these bandits."

"We'll talk ther matter over arter supper, pard," said Long Pete. "Yuba tells me thar's a company ov blue-coats sum'er's in ther hills, an' I reckon we kin find 'em, easy enuff."

"That is my idea, exactly," Mordaunt averred.

"An' ther wagons, boss—shell we leave 'em down in ther pass?" asked Billy Mason.

"Yes, for if I am not mistaken we shall have occasion to use them again within a few days; but you may fetch up the horses and put a guard over the wagons until they have been unloaded."

The Mordaunts then rode into the stockade, where they turned their horses over to a minor who had been doing sentry duty during the absence of his comrades.

Pauline and Nellie gazed at their strange surroundings with eager, curious eyes. The solidity of the stockade and the numerous loopholes piercing the thick walls of the house gave the place a formidable look—possessed a significance not lost upon the quick-witted girls.

"You must have expected unwelcome guests, papa, when you built this place," Pauline observed.

"We did," returned Jackson Mordaunt; "but we were happily disappointed until the Goldites made their appearance a few days ago."

"However, I trust that the interior of the place will be found as comfortable as the outside is cheerless. The four of us have the entire establishment to ourselves, the boys preferring the shelter of the tent, yonder, against the bluff."

"And the mine, Uncle Jackson—where is it?" asked Nellie.

"We'll have a look at it in due time, my dear. Let us first superintend the unpacking of the wagons, for night is near at hand."

"Where have you been, Madge, and you, Rube, during the four years that have elapsed since we so unexpectedly parted company in Leadville?" Old Duke Harpy asked, when the situation had been made known to him and he had in a degree recovered his equanimity.

"Rather ask, where have I not been!" replied the Bandit Queen, a bitter smile curving her red lips. "From pillar to post, from bad to worse! has been my lot!

"But of all that, more anon. Let us be content, for the present, with the fact that I have twenty bold followers at my back—fellows who, for my sake, will stand by the Brood of the Branded Viper, through thick and thin, to the bitter end."

"Good!" exclaimed Old Harpy; "we may need 'em."

"And you, Rube—how has the world used you?"

The gambler showed his teeth in a peculiar smile.

"Just now, as well as I could wish, though it has kept me down pretty thoroughly, as a general thing, since that Leadville fiasco," he replied.

"But where have you and Ben come from?"

"We have just resigned positions of high trust and honor in a band of red robbers, that we might back you up in your clever impersonation of Dick Royale," returned Old Duke Harpy, with an unctuous smile.

Rube Harpy simply looked his amazement.

"Now, don't look surprised, my dear boy," cautioned Old Duke, leering villainously, "we are onto your little scheme, and we're going to hold our forces in reserve, to appear at the proper moment."

"In short, the Branded Viper herewith subordinates himself to you, with the sole reservation that his wrongs be fittingly avenged!"

"They shall be," responded Rube, with a sardonic smile. "But may I ask where and how you came into possession of an outline of my plans?"

"Your pard, Dave Danton, gave the snap away last night to Ben, who, in turn, told me."

"Danton? Curse him, he's beyond baffling now!" hissed Rube.

"But what if Royale should turn up?" asked Madge.

"Such a thing is altogether out of question," declared Rube.

"So we thought at Leadville; but—"

"He is dead, now, if I understand the matter," interrupted Ben Harpy coolly.

Madge started and turned pale.

"Dead!" she faltered, vainly striving to conceal her agitation. "Rube—"

"He was killed up in Colorado, while attempting to escape an arrest," glibly interrupted the gambler. "Getting possession of his papers, I assumed his name for the purpose of meeting the Mordaunts down here."

"But is it possible, Madge, that you yet cling to that old passion for him?"

Into the eyes of the Bandit Queen came a fierce gleam.

"I still cling to it," she replied, coldly and proudly. "I shall always cling to it! It came to me unbidden; I cannot drive it away!"

"We'll drop the subject," said Old Duke Harpy, in a subdued voice. "Heaven knows Madge has suffered enough without the probing of old wounds."

"Yes, I have suffered," admitted the Bandit Queen; "suffered more than any one of you would be willing to believe; but now that Dick Royale is dead ends it all."

"I am a changed woman—a woman with a mission!"

"And that mission is revenge—revenge upon those who won my lover from me, then upon myself for having sought to wreck his happiness!"

"Good Lord! Madge, you must do nothing rash!" expostulated Old Duke Harpy, shivering with a nameless horror at the strange words of his beautiful but wicked daughter.

"Nothing rash—certainly not!" returned Madge, her proud lip curling with contempt.

"Rube, you may tell me your plans, and the Goldites will withdraw until they are wanted."

"First, though, tell me if you have yet presented yourself to the Mordaunts as Dick Royale?"

"To all save Pauline, and to her indirectly," replied the gambler, and he related his adventure at the motte immediately preceding the attack of the Apaches.

"Well, you will not be able to deceive her in regard to your identity," averred Madge, bluntly. "Much as you resemble Dick Royale, she will detect the counterfeit at once. Remember that I recognized you the moment you appeared."

"But I shall meet Pauline under far different circumstances," promptly returned the gambler. "I have studied the matter in all its bearings, and I flatter myself that I am cute enough to carry the job to a successful issue."

"Then, too, if worse comes to worse, I still have left a fighting chance."

"Provided you get clear."

"Trust me for that. I shall time my appearance so as to keep open an avenue of escape."

Old Duke Harpy shook his head disparagingly.

"It is a big risk, Rube," he observed. "Better adopt another plan. Why, with Madge's party

we could capture the train almost without a struggle."

"That's what," declared Ben.

Rube Harpy scowled darkly.

"I tell you it's of no use to argue—it's my job and must be done my way," he exclaimed.

"Very well, then," said Madge; "I will withdraw with the Goldites to our camp. At any hour, day or night, that you may wish to communicate with us you will find a man here in waiting."

The gambler, ungraciously enough, muttered his thanks.

Within ten minutes the Goldites had retired, and he was alone.

CHAPTER XXX.

FROM BAD TO WORSE.

THE trap in which Royal Richard, Big Dale and Dave Danton so unexpectedly found themselves had been thoroughly planned.

Not an avenue through which they might slip had been left unguarded. Not less than a score of frowning muzzles covered them, and at such close range that there wasn't so much as a semblance of a fighting chance left.

"It's no use, pard," muttered the Red-Hand Sport to his companions. "We are completely corked and about the only thing we can do is to yield with the best grace possible."

"That is a sensible speech, my man," said the leader of the masked band. "Just raise your hands. Orders are to take you dead or alive, but we don't care to cheat the hangman."

"He'll get his own soon enough, I reckon, if you attempt to remain long at this business," was the cool retort.

"May I ask what you propose to do with us?"

"Take you into camp. Now, dry up; you'll have a chance to do all the talking you can find breath for, by and by."

"Disarm them, boys, and tie them hard and fast."

The command was promptly obeyed. Each was bound to his saddle and effectually gagged.

"Now, forward, men, to the horses. We must report at once, for if I am not mistaken, this capture is an important one."

The men fell in with almost military precision, it seemed to the three captives, and set forward at a double-quick.

Their objective point proved to be a dense growth of chaparral a fourth of a mile up the valley, forth from the recesses of which, at a signal from the leader, were brought a score of horses.

"Mount!" then was the order given, and in a moment the cavalcade was sweeping on up the valley at a pace that seemed reckless in the deepening twilight.

The better part of an hour was thus consumed, and then the party halted in a magnificent grove at the head of the valley.

"Steady, now, boys!" came the voice of the leader. "Forward, at a walk."

Again the command pushed forward.

Five—ten—fifteen minutes elapsed, then came the hail:

"Halt! who comes there?"

"Friends."

"Advance, one, with the countersign."

Two of the men rode forward. Scarcely had they vanished in the gloom when, at a word from the leader, the entire squad advanced.

The Red-Hand Sport and his fellow-captives started with surprise.

Before them, plainly revealed by a glowing camp-fire, were a number of men in the uniform of the United States Army.

"A pretty kettle of fish!" thought the detective. "But what the upshot of it all will be, remains to be seen."

"Ho, Lieutenant Brainard! As you return so soon, it must be with good news!" cried a fine-appearing young soldier in the uniform of a captain, advancing as the cavalcade halted.

"It is, indeed, captain. My scout down the valley to-night was not without results—results which may be made to speak for themselves," returned the leader of the squad.

"Ah! you secured a captive?"

"Three of them, captain—as desperate cut-throats, I dare say, as are to be found in these hills."

"Ha! three, you say! But proceed, Brainard; you may make a full report."

"Six or seven miles down the valley below us, captain, we came upon a fresh wagon-trail, which at that point turned into a narrow pass leading north.

"A few hundred yards below us the valley narrowed to a gorge, making a sharp curve. While making an examination of the trail, I had dispatched a sentry to that point, with the result that he discovered three men approaching.

"Leaving our horses in the chaparral, we formed an ambuscade at the curve and captured the fellows. They are here, captain."

"You have, indeed, done well, Brainard," exclaimed the captain, in a pleased manner. "Our chase of the Goldites has heretofore been a will-o'-the-wisp affair, but now something tangible offers; for, by my sword! these fellows shall talk!"

"Conduct them to my quarters, lieutenant,

one at a time, and hold your men in readiness for action."

The command was promptly obeyed.

It fell to the lot of the Red-Hand Sport to be the first of the luckless trio half-tragged, half-carried into the tent of Captain Dale.

There he was placed on the ground, tingling in every nerve, so excruciating was the torture of his position.

"Easy with the fellow, boys!" exclaimed the captain. "From the looks of things, his hide would make a first-rate sieve."

"Now, remove his gag."

It was with no slight relief that the sport felt the obstruction to speech removed. He attempted to speak, but his tongue refused to act.

Captain Dale placed a small quantity of brandy between his parched lips. The potent liquor had the desired effect.

Royal Richard's eye met that of the captain with a peculiar gleam.

"Upon my word, this is rough lines for an old friend, Dale," he ejaculated, faintly.

The young soldier sprung to his feet, his face paling and flushing by turns.

"Who can the fellow be?" he muttered, catching up a light and turning its rays full upon the face of the prisoner. "Is it a trick? His voice, weak as it is, has a familiar ring."

The Red-Hand Sport met his gaze with a quizzical stare, a smile on his bruised lips.

Again the captain started, and he exclaimed:

"By heavens! it is Dick—"

"Dick Brazzleton, or Royal Richard—just as you choose," coolly interrupted the prisoner. "I've no choice between the handles—either is good enough for me."

Not a word said the gallant captain. Out came his knife, and in a trice the sport was eased of his bonds and lifted upon a comfortable couch.

"A grave mistake has been made, Lieutenant Brainard, and yet one in which I cannot attach any blame to you," said Captain Dale, turning to his subordinate.

"Call Surgeon Vance."

"Wait," interposed Royal Richard. "My companions in misery are in more need of that gentleman's attentions than am I."

"I shall regard it as no slight favor, Dale, if their wounds are looked to at once."

"As you will, my dear—Brazzleton," said the captain, in acquiescence, and Lieutenant Brainard and his men withdrew, leaving the two alone.

"I am sorry to have been the cause of your being subjected to such treatment," pursued the cavalryman. "We are here to root out a desperate outlaw band known throughout the southern part of the Territory as the Goldites, or Mountain Bandits. Hard pushed, they have taken refuge in this section of the Mimbres Range, but all our efforts thus far to discover their retreat have proved unavailing. To-night, I dispatched Lieutenant Brainard, with a strong squad, all disguised, down the valley to pick up any stragglers from Queen Madge's band that might be found. Your party came into contact with them, and were brought into camp."

"The mistake was mutual," said Royal Richard, laughingly, "for we were ready to affirm that *your* men were outlaws."

"But did you say, Harry, that these bandits are led by a woman known as Queen Madge?"

"Yes, and report has it that she is not only as brave as a lioness, but rarely beautiful, too."

"May I inquire why you ask?"

"Certainly; it is merely through curiosity, I suppose, although your characterization of this Bandit Queen most aptly fits one whom I used to know."

"Perhaps, then, you may be induced to remain and join us in our search," suggested Captain Dale, with visible eagerness.

The Red-Hand Sport shook his head.

"It would be impossible, Harry," he returned. "I must get away from here within an hour, at the latest."

The captain expressed his regret, and then the surgeon entered.

After a brief explanation, preceded by an introduction, the man of medicine set to work, and in an incredibly short time the Red-Hand Sport announced that he felt much easier and stronger—so much so, in fact, that he would no longer delay his departure.

"You'll pull through, for you've the nerve and the coolness," said Surgeon Vance; "but I would advise you to go at an easy pace for a few days. There is a bullet wound in your head that may produce brain trouble."

A grim smile curled the sport's lips.

"Trust me to take due care, doctor," he returned. "I am just recovered from a gruesome sort of hallucination superinduced by that same wound."

"But I now feel clear-headed and strong, and anticipate no further trouble from that source."

"Captain, in a day or two I shall be with you again for a few hours, when I shall probably have something to say that will be of deep interest to you."

"And now, gentlemen, I must away; but let me assure you first, that my sincere thanks are

due to yourselves and to Lieutenant Brainard and his men, and I request that you tender him them; for that which I at first thought to be a stroke of great ill-luck is instead one of rare good fortune."

A few minutes later the Red-Hand Sport, Big Dale and Dave Danton rode out of the camp. An escort accompanied them to the head of the valley.

"Pards, dang my buttons! ef I don't feel in fightin' trim ag'in," exclaimed Big Dale, as they spurred away from the timber, alone. "Ther Doc aire no slouch."

"Which fact we can all attest," supplemented Danton, with a glance at the sport.

"Yes, we are all the better for our brief captivity," assented Royal Richard. "Still, I am exceedingly anxious to reach the Hidden Hope."

"An hour will do ther job, easy, fer with ther moon ther valley aire gittin' most es light es day," said the plainsman.

Then silence came over the trio—a deep, brooding silence, unbroken save by the rapid hoofstrokes of the horses.

"Thar's ther pass!" cried Big Dale, at last. "Ease up, pards, fer ther way grows rough."

It was a timely caution, yet had it hardly been uttered when the black steed of Royal Richard stumbled and went with a broken leg.

The sport alighted on his feet, severely shaken but otherwise unhurt.

And, at the same instant, as if in response to the fall of the horse, from the shelter of tree and rock sprang a half-score of yelling Apaches.

A sound much like an oath escaped Big Dale. In an instant his revolvers were out and up, ready for work.

"Cut and run for it!" ordered Royal Richard in peremptory tones. "Go!"

That was all, and with the last word, the dashing sport disappeared in the dense undergrowth fringing the southern side of the valley.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A SERIES OF SURPRISES.

"Now for a good look at the fabulous treasure-trove!" exclaimed Nellie, when the wagons had been unpacked and supper was over. "I've always desired to see a gold mine, and since I've heard so much of this one I have been well-nigh consumed by curiosity."

"Your desire shall be gratified, and at once, my dear!" Jackson Mordaunt said; "that is, if your courage is of the kind needful."

"I think, papa, that you will find us equal to the emergency," said Pauline with a smile.

"Then we will at once proceed to the mine; but let me assure you, now and here, that there is but little to be seen—absolutely nothing illustrative of the usual mining processes."

Roger and the girls looked surprised.

"Further than that, I may say that we shall leave here shortly—within a week at the latest," pursued Jackson Mordaunt; "leave here for all time."

His auditors could not repress a start.

"The mine has not come up to your expectations?" ventured Roger.

"*The Hidden Hope has played out!*"

The effect of this announcement, may, to use a trite expression, be more readily imagined than described.

It brought with it a feeling of gloom and depression.

After all the perils of the long journey, it was to end in disappointment.

Roger was the first to rally from the shock.

"I am sorry to hear of your ill-luck, Jackson!" he exclaimed, extending his hand. Then, in a cheerful tone, he continued:

"But it is useless to sigh for what might have been; yes, it is worse than useless—it is folly."

"We are all here together, and I propose that we remain—buy a ranch and settle."

"I've a few hundreds left, and you may consider yourself again upon your feet financially."

Jackson stared at him quizzically, then with eyes that grew misty.

"Bless you, my boy!" he exclaimed fervently.

"Your heart is in the right place, but—but—"

It was in vain that he attempted to stifle an outburst of rollicking laughter.

"Bless you, my boy!" he iterated chokingly. "I should think you could buy a ranch or two! If you'll just step into the banks of Socorro, Albuquerque and Santa Fe, you'll find something like two millions to your credit."

"Two millions!" echoed Roger.

"Two millions!" repeated Pauline and Nellie, in a breath.

And the trio stared at each other, and at Jackson Mordaunt, as if they could not credit the evidence of their ears.

"Exactly!" affirmed Jackson, smiling in undisguised joy. "*The Hidden Hope has played out*, but not until it yielded a net profit of something more than six millions in gold!"

"Of this vast sum, one-third is divided to the credit of Roger Mordaunt, in the banks mentioned; one-third to the credit of my partners, Peter Jenkins and Dale Keith; and the remainder in my own name, in the same institutions."

With what eager joy the three listened to the lightest word!

From comparative poverty to princely affluence, almost at a bound!

A moment of silence and inaction was as much as Pauline and Nellie could endure. With a glad cry, each sprung into the other's arms.

Roger sunk back into his chair and stared helplessly at his brother.

Truly, the revelations of the miner were bewildering enough to daze one! Yet not one of the trio doubted that they were absolutely and rigidly true.

Jackson Mordaunt was not one to trifl.

There was a warm smile upon his bearded lips, a tender glow in his clear gray eyes, as he looked from one to another of his happy relatives.

He had given battle to Fortune, had conquered her and invaded her domain, and was now beginning to enjoy his merited reward.

Roger was the first to regain coherent use of his tongue. He sprung to his feet, seemingly forgetful of his infirmities, and repossessed himself of his brother's hand.

"Jackson, I congratulate you, and I thank you," he cried, in unsteady tones. "If ever man deserved success, you are he!"

The miner bowed an acknowledgment, and as soon as the two girls had in a degree recovered from their transport of delight, the happy party left the house, Roger walking with a cane and leaning on his brother's arm.

Straight toward the bluff back of the house went Jackson, entering a small tent erected against the rocks.

"This is the entrance to the Hidden Hope," he announced, as he secured a bundle of torches and lighted one. "A minute more and we will be within it."

Parting the corners at the rear of the tent, he revealed a wall of rock, which in turn yielded to his touch, displaying a narrow opening.

Into this pushed the party, and then the stone rolled back into its place, leaving them in a passage lighted only by the rays of the torch.

A few paces before them was a stout wooden door, which Jackson Mordaunt unlocked and threw open, saying:

"Enter. The mine is before you."

"This the mine!" ejaculated Nellie, pausing on the threshold. "It looks more like a vast, dreary cave!"

"And so it is, my dear," affirmed the miner, with an indulgent smile. "I can certainly attest its dreariness, for with Jenkins and Keith I once passed a week almost within its confines, without meat or drink, shut in by a horde of howling savages."

Roger shuddered.

"That was a terrible experience, papa," she said. "To be shut up in such a place and under such circumstances would, I think, drive me mad."

"Well, it was a situation that not one of us relished," Mordaunt returned; "and yet it proved to be the turning-point in our luckless careers.

"During the forenoon, in clear weather, the cavern is fairly light. On the morning of the third day of our enforced seclusion, while on guard in the first, or outer, chamber of the cavern, I found, projecting from the sandy floor, an ingot of refined gold.

"At the first thrust into the yielding sand, a second ingot, double the size of the preceding one, came to light, and then a sword—rusty, and evidently an old-time Spanish weapon.

"Then the truth forced itself upon me.

"The cavern contained a vast treasure, collected and left there by the Spaniards of long ago!"

Roger drew a long breath.

"It is a wonderful find, Jackson," he exclaimed. "Your narrative would not seem out of place in Arabian Nights!"

"It would not, indeed," smilingly admitted the miner; "and yet, it is all golden reality!"

"From the first we have guarded our secret with jealous care, concealing the entrance to the cave and blocking the passage with a heavy door. In fact, we fortified our position to withstand any ordinary attack from Indians or outlaws—for an attack was simply inevitable should our discovery become known."

"That done, Keith and myself put ourselves to unearthing the treasure, while Jenkins got together a limited number of trusty men to freight the metal into the market."

"I have known for a month past that our operations were nearing an end, but it has come even sooner than I expected."

"As I have said, the Hidden Hope has played out. Within a week, we shall be on our way to Denver to take possession of property I have purchased there—our future home."

This last announcement was the cause of another joyous outbreak on the part of Pauline and Nellie, and, without further delay, the party proceeded to explore the mysterious cavern.

On their return to the plateau, the brothers made their way to the house, leaving the girls to follow at their pleasure, with the injunction that they were not to go beyond the confines of the stockade.

The evening was a delightful one, and the moon, rising in the purple eastern sky, flooded the plateau with light.

For a time the girls, arm in arm, walked to and fro in silence. Each was busy with her thoughts, but with a common subject.

"Pauline," began Nellie, at last, with visible hesitancy—"Pauline, may I ask if you saw Dick Royale at the camp last night?"

"I did, Nellie," was the low-toned reply. "But that was all—just a glimpse; and then I fainted, and was carried away by the Apaches."

"But were you sure it was Dick?"

"Why do you ask?"

Pauline paused as she put the counter-query, the flush in her cheek giving way to pallor.

Dave Danton's interrupted revelations came back to her with startling force.

Nellie, too, changed color. She was about to reply, when a burst of distant war-whoops checked the words.

A tall, lank form arose from a rude bench near the stockade-gate, and rifle in hand passed out to the open plateau.

It was Long Pete Jenkins.

A moment later, and he was joined by Dan Yuba.

"Pard," uttered the gangling giant, lifting his head from a listening attitude, "I kalkilate thar be sum one comin' up ther pass. Le's slip down an' see."

Accordingly, they hurried to the bottom of the declivity and sought shelter in the shadowy undergrowth.

Not a minute too soon.

A horseman dashed furiously up the pass and halted beside the empty wagons.

"It be thet Royale feller, Pete," muttered Yuba, as the rider turned his head so that the moonbeams crossed his face.

"Ye bet!" ejaculated Jenkins, springing from his covert.

"This way, pard, ef ye be lookin' fer ther camp."

The pretender, with a start of surprise, turned and came forward.

"Up thar," tersely continued Jenkins, pointing to the steep and narrow roadway.

"Thar be red-skins down ther pass?"

"Yes—somewhere near its mouth. I have been hard pushed."

The plainsmen resumed their places among the bushes. Hardly had Rube Harpy gained the plateau when two men glided into view from down the pass.

There could be no mistaking the burly form and rugged features of the one in advance.

Dan Yuba started so sharply as to betray their exact position.

"Heavings, pard!" he exclaimed in a hollow voice, clutching at Long Pete's arm. "It's Big Dale, or his ghost!"

Uttering a cry of delight, Jenkins broke away and sprung forward to be followed a moment later by Yuba.

As the three met and clasped hands, a perfect torrent of ejaculations poured from each.

"No, I hain't dead," avowed Big Dale, for perhaps the twentieth time; "but I soon will be, ef you galoots don't let up!"

In the mean time, within the stockade above, Pauline and Nellie had watched with deep interest the preparations to meet the Apaches in the event of an attack.

Their interrupted conversation was for the time forgotten.

In the midst of the activity occasioned by the alarm, a man slipped in at the open gateway, and, after a searching look at his surroundings, strode rapidly toward the two girls.

Not until he confronted them with outstretched hands did either notice his approach.

"Pauline!"

In suppressed, yet musical tones the name fell from his lips.

"It is he!" exclaimed Nellie, starting back.

Pauline vouchsafed not a word in response. Her gray eyes fixed themselves upon his eager, handsome face in a sort of wondering stare.

"Pauline, do you know me?"

"I do!" was the coldly uttered reply. "You are Reuben Harpy!"

"Go!" and she pointed imperiously to the open gateway.

The gambler drew back as if stabbed. A dull, leaden hue came over his face, an ominous light into his eyes.

"Most assuredly will I go, Pauline Mor-daut!" he began, enunciating the words with the greatest difficulty, so overpowering was his rage, his chagrin. "But I shall return, and you—"

"Ye dirty cuss!" grated a hoarse voice in his ear, as a heavy hand dropped upon his shoulder. "D'ye know me? I've cheated the grave fer a chalice at ye, an' won!"

For just a breath the entrapped desperado seemed to have lost his nerve. He quivered and trembled under the weight of the avenging hand as if utterly cowed. Then—as if a current charged with daring, with recklessness, had been infused into his veins—he turned in his tracks, throwing off the heavy hand as slightly as if it possessed but a feather's weight!

A lightning-like succession of terrific blows—a ringing yell of defiance, and he darted toward

the gate, a cocked revolver in each hand, leaving Big Dale, Long Pete and Dan Yuba in a bewildered, struggling heap!

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN THE GOLDITE CAMP.

It was not without a feeling akin to despair that bold Royal Richard retreated, after the mishap to his house, into the growth of young trees and bushes extending along the southern side of the narrow valley.

It was painfully evident to him that in his condition he stood scarcely one chance in twenty of eluding the wary and wily Apaches.

But that chance, desperate as it was, was not to be lost, and as Big Dale and Dave Danton spurred toward the pass he disappeared with a suddenness that fairly startled the over-confident red-skins.

"I must get up into the hills, or I shall go under," he gritted, as a burst of yells at the edge of the growth apprised him of swift pursuit.

"My only chance is to find cover."

Keeping up the valley, he glided through the bushes until he reached the entrance of a dark gorge extending back into the hills, into which he plunged without hesitation.

At that moment the Apaches were not far in his rear, as was evidenced by their frequent signals.

A few hundred feet above the valley, Royal Richard left the gorge, cautiously clambering up one of the sharply-sloping banks to a more gradual ascent.

The effort cost him not only the keenest agony, but complete exhaustion.

But the ascent had been accomplished with all the stealth the situation so urgently demanded, and the sport had the satisfaction of hearing his pursuers glide by in the darkness.

As soon as he had, in a measure, regained his strength, he again set forward, laying his course toward the upper hills and keeping in the shadows as far as possible.

A few minutes sufficed to bring him to the borders of a splendidly wooded plateau.

There his progress was arrested in a manner as startling as unsuspected.

Forth from the shelter afforded by the trunks of the trees darted three men, brawny, well-armed fellows, roughly dressed and of sinister aspect.

Their faces were hidden by masks of some dark stuff, but it was evident to Royal Richard that they cared very little whether or not their identity was discovered.

"Upon him, pard!" exclaimed the one in advance. "Take him alive. He is one of the three spies, and Queen Madge will pay well for his capture!"

So sudden was the onset that the sport was caught fairly off his guard. His revolvers were knocked from his hands, and the next instant he was seized and thrown to the ground.

"Your lariat, Jim," cried the desperado who had taken the lead. "I'm thinkin' ther feller's a game 'un, an' we cain't risk lettin' him escape."

The rope was quickly forthcoming, and, as any further attempt at resistance would have been simply preposterous, the Red-Hand Sport quietly submitted.

When his hands had been secured, he was raised to his feet and given to understand that he must keep a still tongue, under pain of death.

The desperadoes then plunged into the depths of the woods, one taking the lead, and the others walking on each side of the captive.

A rapid walk of a few minutes carried them to the outposts of the Goldite camp, where they were halted in regular military style before being permitted to pass the lines.

Bold Richard, forgetful of mental and physical misery alike, noted in detail the more salient features of the encampment as he was hurried forward.

"Perhaps Captain Dale may hear something to his advantage, if I am not made into material for a funeral before the rising of another sun," he mused, grimly.

Little time was left him for observation or cogitating, however. His captors hurried him straight across the encampment and into the yawning mouth of a huge cavern reaching away into the bluff at the back of the plateau.

Here again were they halted by a sentry, and this time they were forced to await the appearance of Queen Madge from the interior of the cavern.

As she glided into view, the sentry saluted.

"Who is it that has asked to see me?" she demanded, peering sharply at the bandits and their captive.

"It aire me, Arkansaw, my queen, and these galoots with me aire Injun Dick an' Sol Moses," returned one of the trio, advancing a pace.

"Oh, yes; you are the men Lieutenant Morales sent out to learn the position of the cavalry," the Bandit Queen exclaimed. "But what is your business with me, my men?"

"Wehev captured a spy," announced Arkansaw, in reply, with a grandiloquent wave of his

hand to indicate the Red-Hand Sport. "We nabbed him in ther very act. This is him, my queen."

"A spy?" and Queen Madge started.

"He aire thet same sort ov a critter, my queen," Arkansaw Jim declared, emphatically.

"Thar war three ov 'em left the blue-coat camp, es Sol, hyer, an' Dick, kin tell ye. They kem down the valley, while we-uns took the cut 'crost ther hills. We nailed ther cuss back thar jest in the aidge ov ther timber."

"And the others, Arkansaw?"

"He war ther only one w'c kem this way. They must'a separated down in ther valley."

"Quite likely; but bring the fellow inside, Arkansaw. As Morales is away, I will see wha I can make out of him."

"And you, Dick and Sol, wait here until Arkansaw joins you."

The outlaws mumbled a response, and then the Red-Hand Sport was led along a narrow passage and thence into a large and airy chamber of the cavern, where a light was burning upon a rocky shelf or projection.

A glance at his surroundings convinced the captive sport that he was in the quarters of the Bandit Queen.

There was a strange glow in his eyes, and he stood with averted face as the woman confronted him.

"Bind him hard and fast, Arkansaw, and place him upon that couch," ordered the queen, her voice betraying something of sympathy as she noted the condition of the captive.

The command was promptly obeyed.

"Now, leave me, Arkansaw, but await my call in the passage," pursued the queen, and as the desperado retreated, she took up the light and approached the couch.

The Red-Hand Sport lay with his eyes half-closed, to all appearances utterly indifferent to his condition and his surroundings; yet his brain was busy, and he noted and weighed well the varying expressions of the Goldite queen.

"You are in a bad box, my man," she exclaimed, her magnificent black eyes ablaze as she peered into his face. "But wait—your disguise has become partially disarranged; permit me to remove it."

Royal Richard's eyes opened wide.

"Hold, my lady! That is taking an unfair advantage," he protested, half in mockery.

"You unmask, and I've no word to say."

The woman, going down into the hazel orbs of the sport with an expression akin to fear, abruptly checked the sharp retort that came to her lips.

"As you will! she exclaimed, forcing a laugh to conceal her agitation as she drew aside the mask. "It can matter little, as you will never leave here alive."

"You are mistaken on that score, I think," was Royal Richard's cool response, as he gazed steadily at the beautiful face. "But proceed, my lady; I am awfully sorry my phiz has been so disfigured within the past few hours. There was a time when it would have been charming in your eyes!"

Queen Madge started angrily, and yet her white, tapering fingers trembled weakly as she tore aside the disfiguring mustache and wig.

Just an instant she stared down into the face of the captive sport—an instant in which a world of feeling—of joy and sorrow, of hope and despair—surged over her, leaving her weak and trembling upon the edge of the couch.

Royal Richard looked at her with cynical eyes.

"It is you!" she sobbed, rather than said, lifting her great black eyes to his face. "I have been told that you were dead!"

"It is no fault of the Branded Viper or his brood that it was not the truth you heard," he curtly averred. "You may remember that."

Queen Madge quivered as if deeply touched; then proudly lifted her head.

"That is the truth, save where I am concerned," she admitted, with no show of reluctance, her eyes filling with a softer light, a slight flush staining cheek and throat. "Before Heaven, I never harmed you, Dick—shall not now! The worst—all—that can be said, is that I courted your love and failed!"

The flush deepened—the glorious black orbs grew tender and moist with unshed tears. The woman's agitation was piteous.

The Red-Hand Sport steeled his heart. Bitterly as he disliked and detested Madge Harpy, it was foreign to his nature to witness her grief unmoved.

"We will pass that—let it remain a sealed book," he uttered, coldly, anxious to avert the outburst the woman's face portended. "Let us deal with the present, and as foes."

The next instant the detective's teeth sunk in his nether lip almost fiercely. He had blundered—had hastened that which he was striving to escape. The woman weeping violently, flung herself upon his breast, crying:

"Foes? Never, Dick—never! Anything but that! Oh, my love!"

The awkward shuffling of booted feet, a dry, significant cough, broke in upon her incoherent ravings, to the inexpressible relief of Royal Richard, and partially recalled her to her senses.

She confronted the intruder with flaming eyes.

"Insolent! how dare you!" she enunciated, in sharp, hissing strains, her hands nervously seeking her weapons. "Begone! or—"

"I mos' umbly begs yer 'parding, mum," interrupted Arkansaw, the intruder, with an unctuous bow; "an' I begs ter inform ye that ye kin trust ter my descreshun! Fur be it from me ter repeat w'ot I've see'd or heered, mum!"

By no means oil to troubled waters was the declaration of the desperado. There was the fury of an enraged tigress in the face of the Bandit Queen when he ceased.

"What want you here?" she demanded, with a mighty effort holding her passion in subjection. "Quick! such treachery shall not go unpunished!"

"Wait, mum!" expostulated Arkansaw, with a deprecatory gesture. "'Twa'n't treachery. I kem ter keep back them es ye w'u'dn't keer ter hev see or heur; fer ye aire wanted out thar, mum—bad! an' ther leffttenant war comin', whether or no!"

"Yer brother has arrived from ther—"

"Wait! that will do!" cut in Queen Madge, casting a half-fearful glance at the Red-Hand Sport and catching up and adjusting her mask. "I will see them."

"Remain here, Arkansaw, and permit no one to enter the chamber. Remember, too, that silence—that inscrutable secrecy—is golden!"

"Sum times!" uttered the Goldite, leering cunningly at the retreating form of his queen, as he dropped her well filled purse into his capacious pocket; "sumtimes et's jest t'other way—talk ain't cheap!"

"Enyhow, ef thar's any gilt in gab, I'm ther galoot w'ot'll sport a roll before I see you ag'in, my queen!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ARKANSAW JIM AS A SPECULATOR.

A PECULIAR expression, partly of hope, equally of disgust, came into the pallid face of the Red-Hand Sport as he listened to the mumbleings of his warden.

Was it a bid for a bribe?

Or had the scoundrel, in his exuberance at the unexpected change in his prospects, simply betrayed himself?

"More likely the latter," thought Richard; "but his words imply that he is not impervious with a golden bait in sight."

"Arkansaw!"

The Goldite turned at the cautious hail, a pleased sort of grin displaying his yellow teeth.

"W'ot is et, boss?" he asked, craning his head forward and jingling the contents of the purse in his pocket. "Did I hear ye say su'thin'?"

"You will hear me say more, if you come nearer."

Arkansaw shook his head; assuming an air of mock humility.

"Cain't do et, boss—I cain't, an' that's jest ther size ov et!" he declared, sorrowfully. "I am pore, but proud. We ain't ekils, an' so I cain't sociate with ye! I tell ye, ther size ov a galoot's pile makes a heap ov difference on this hyar leetle footstool ov ours!"

"No, boss, I cain't see et—not jest yet; but ef ye kin open up ther way ter a leetle specker-lashun—su'thin' that'll sorter ekilize our piles a bit—mebbe then, boss, I c'u'd stand et ter talk biz—but nuthin' else!"

"Business be it!" uttered the sport, with a grim smile. "That's me!"

Arkansaw Jim uttered a breath of relief, and after a cautious survey of the passage seated himself upon the edge of the couch, facing the entrance.

"Now, sail in yer elephant, boss," he muttered, in a thick undertone. "I'm open, fer l'm a specklerator from over ther Divide, an' ther bigges' pile takes ther hog!"

"Ye want me ter turn ye loose?"

"Exactly. What's it worth?"

"Reckon two hundred an' fifty'll see ye out, boss—not a durned cent less!"

"Taken, with an additional two-fifty for an extra service."

Arkansaw started nervously.

"Name et, boss," he requested, for the first time facing the captive.

"Guide me by the short cut you have spoken of to the camp of Captain Dale."

The desperado leaped to his feet.

"Run my head inter a noose!" he ejaculated, in genuine disgust. "Not much, Sally Ann!"

"Take your head out of a noose, you mean," said the detective.

"W'ot's that?"

"Just what I said—by so doing you will escape the halter," iterated Royal Richard.

"What I have done for you I can do again!"

At these significant words, Arkansaw Jim's face instantly elongated, and he started up with bulging eyes.

"W'ot's that?" he interrogated, in a hoarse whisper. "Who aire ye—man or devil?"

"Half-and-half, one would think," laughed the sport. "I don't wonder, though, that you fail to recognize me, Ame Croppee. It's a fair age since that fiasco of yours at Leadville, leaving disguises out of the question."

"An' ye aire thet same spotter?"

"Identically, Croppee."

"I cain't jest believe ye, boss!"

"Why not?"

Arkansaw shifted from foot to foot uneasily.

"Come—out with it!" urged he of the Red Hand, his piercing hazel eyes fixing themselves upon the treacherous little orbs of the dismayed desperado. "Time is precious!"

"Wal, I heered ter-day es how ye'd bin fanged—durned ef I didn't," he blurted.

"And who said it?"

"Ther queen's brother."

"Rube Harpy?"

"Ya-as, ther same duck."

"He lied. Look here, Croppee—here is proof of what I say," and the sport turned upon his side, exposing the palm of his left hand. "What do you see?"

Again did Arkansaw's expression change; but he gazed steadily at the exposed member.

"Ther ace, king, queen, jack an' ten ov hearts!" he muttered, more to himself than in reply to the question. "Worked out in red—ther revenge ov King Karl, ther Toll-Taker. I members et now, though none ov ther others know enything ov it."

"A red hand—a royal flush," said the sport, turning to face the outlaw; "and so I have come to be known as Royal Richard, of the Red Hand."

"I hev heered ov ther cuss slingin' that handle," observed Arkansaw, "an' they say he aire a holy terror."

"But, boss, I cain't see whar I be gittin' my head out ov ther noose, es 'tain't in eny danger ov gettin' in one at present."

"Wait a few hours, and I'll guarantee you'll find the rope tight enough," was the grim response. "Come—I await your answer."

But Arkansaw proved obdurate.

"Thar's another way I kin make more out ov ye," he declared, with a devilish leer. "Our leffttenant, Morales, es blue-blooded a Mexican bandit es ever hopped over ther border, aire dead struck on ther queen, an' they is ter be tied es soon es we kin cross ther border. He's es jealous es a Turk, an' ef I go ter him with ther story ov an ole lover ov ther queen, an' all that sort ov thing, I kin raise a thousand out ov him, an' be fifty mile away 'fore ther blue-coats aire ready ter tackle ther Goldites."

"No, no, Richard, I cain't lay down my hand at yer leetle bluff!"

The sport smothered his intense disgust beneath a strange, hard smile.

"That's my figure—if you will have it that way," he said, quickly. "A thousand dollars and a start of twenty-four hours."

"But the stuff—ye hevn't it with ye?"

"Hardly! but you shall have it as soon as we have arrived at Socorro. Satisfactory?"

Arkansaw bent his head as if deep in thought. When he looked up there was a crafty glitter in his ferret-like eyes.

"Boss, I can't be bought!" he exclaimed, in a loud tone. "All ther silver ov all Potosi c'u'dn't make me betray the queen! Now, ye hear me!—shut up!"

At that moment Madge Harpy glided into the chamber. The sport closed one eye and gazed reflectively at the rough wall.

The Goldite chieftainess looked from one to the other.

"An attempt at bribery, eh?" she sneered. "Arkansaw, you may again retire to the passage. Your faithfulness shall not be forgotten."

"Thank'e, mum; I'm pore and proud, but I'm chockful ov principler," mumbled the fellow, skulking out of the chamber.

Twenty feet down the passage he was met by a man in mask.

It was Lieutenant Morales, and he was visibly agitated.

"Ho, Don Hosay! ye can't pass!" exclaimed Arkansaw, displaying his revolver.

"Out of the way, fellow!" returned the Mexican, in good English. "I go to seek the queen."

Arkansaw laughed.

"Ye'd best not, Hosay," he remarked. "Behixt us, the queen hasn't room for ye, jest now!"

Jose Morales's eyes blazed fitfully through his mask.

"What mean you?" he demanded, his voice quivering with passion.

"Easy, now, Don Hosay!" and Arkansaw's hand dropped lightly upon his superior's shooter. "I'm goin' ter do ye a good turn now, fer I'm a friend ter ye an' don't ye fergit it!"

"Explain—explain!" foamed the Mexican.

"S'pose ye hed a rival—"

"I'd kill him!"

"But not so thot ther queen w'u'd know et."

"Dios! no!"

"Now, Don Hosay," Arkansaw impressively exclaimed, "ye keep cool while I tell ye su'thin'. An' don't ye mutter 'bove a whisper, fer ther queen hes quick ears."

"Ye hev a rival!"

"Caramba! Show me the dog!"

"Wait! He aire a han'sum feller—American, too, and ther queen loves him ter destrack-shon."

"Let me pass—I will kill him!" and the Mexican drew a wicked-looking knife.

"An' lose ther queen," exclaimed Arkansaw,

in well-simulated surprise. "Hosay, yer cabeza aire twisted!"

"Listen ter me: Put five hundred dollars inter my hand, an' in an hour I'll hev ther galoot at yer marcy, an' no one ther wiser!"

The Mexican regarded the devilish proposition favorably.

"Done!" he exclaimed, and he proceeded to count the money.

"Now, Hosay, I'm goin' ter send ther queen out ter ye, an' ye must pretend ter hev important business with her. When she leaves ye, go ter ther Black Hole, an' thar ye'll find yer man."

"But the body?"

"I'll get shut ov it later on. Savey?"

Lieutenant Morales replied in the affirmative, and then Arkansaw proceeded back to the chamber.

As he entered, Madge Harpy started up beside the captive.

"Hist!" warningly uttered the outlaw, applying his fingers to his lips. "Ther devil aire ter pay over this hyar galoot, mum! Hosay has smelled a mice!"

The woman clinched her hands.

"The meddlesome fool! let him keep his distance!" she enunciated madly, yet in cautious strain. "Where is he, Arkansaw?"

"Out in ther passage, mum, an' he sw'ars that ef ye don't kem ter him he'll kem ter ye!"

"He must not come here—I will go to him."

"Twon't do no good, mum," and Arkansaw shook his head in a sage way. "A jealous Mexican ain't ter be trifled with."

"True," assented Queen Madge.

"We'll hoodwink him, mum!" and Arkansaw suddenly brightened up. "Go ter him an' stay ten minutes. Then bring 'im hyar. I'll smuggle ther galoot thar off to ther Black Hole. What say?"

"A wise plan—lose no time," and a bill of no small denomination found its way into the hand of the cunning outlaw, ere the Goldite queen, with a breath of relief, left the chamber.

"Come, pard, we'll git out ov hyar an' cut a bee-line fer ther camp ov ther blue-coats," softly exclaimed Arkansaw, bending over the Red-Hand Sport and severing his bonds. "Slow an' easy till ye limber up—thar's time a plenty."

Out through the branching passage crept the two, quitting the cavern by a hidden entrance.

"Jest wait a minute, boss, till I go scare up a couple ov critters," muttered Arkansaw, pushing the sport into a convenient covert. "Ye cain't hoof et, ef ye ain't fit fer ther saddle."

A few minutes sufficed for the execution of the outlaw's errand. He returned leading two horses, saddled and bridled.

In silence the two mounted and rode.

"Give yer critter its head," advised Arkansaw, when they were a safe distance from the camp. "A half-hour'll throw ye 'longside ov Cap'n Dale."

The prediction proved true.

Great was the surprise of the gallant young cavalryman when the Red-Hand Sport thus unexpectedly reappeared.

"What is it, my dear Richard, that brings such a look to your face?" he exclaimed, when greetings had been duly exchanged. "Have you stumbled upon the lair of the Goldites, or have—"

"Your supposition is literally correct, Harry," interrupted the sport. "If you will follow this man, Arkansaw Jim, an ex-Goldite, he will lead you to a point within two hundred feet of their lines."

With a bound, Captain Dale gained his feet.

"This is good news, Dick—the best in a month!" he asseverated, grasping the hands of the sport. "We'll have a 'go' at the gentry without the loss of a minute."

"Just a moment, Dale. The Goldites are divided, one party remaining at the camp, while an equal number have gone on a marauding expedition against some friends of mine living, just now, up in these hills. It will be an especial favor if you will detail a dozen of your men, under Lieutenant Brainard, to accompany me in that direction."

Captain Dale looked puzzled.

"Friends of yours?" he uttered. "May I ask if they are the Mordaunts?"

"They are."

A warm flush suffused the face of the young officer.

"Your request is granted, my dear Richard, with the amendment that I, not Lieutenant Brainard, accompany you!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

OLD DUKE HARPY'S CROWNING STROKE.

OLD DUKE and Ben Harpy were in high clover, as the saying goes.

Queen Madge had given them quarters within the cavern, selecting for them a dry, airy nook and fitting it up with an eye single to their comfort

"Good enough for me," was the terse response of the younger. "But I'm going to snooze till supper-time."

He threw himself upon a couch as he spoke, and Old Duke, after helping himself to another liberal drink, followed the example.

After supper they at once repaired to their quarters, where they deliberately proceeded to "make a night of it."

In the midst of their carousal, they were startled and alarmed by a shrill scream.

The effect was to sober Old Duke and his son, both dropping bottles and glasses and leaping to their feet.

"That was Madge's voice!" articulated the elder, with an anxious look.

"And it came from the place they call the Black Hole," added Ben. "What can have happened?"

Both listened intently.

The Black Hole, as the gloomiest chamber or recess of the cavern had been dubbed, was near at hand, and the two desperadoes now had little difficulty hearing what passed there.

A moment of silence followed the shriek, broken only by a sort of groping sound, as of some one moving slowly over the uneven floor—then a cry of poignant grief.

"A man, that time," avowed Old Duke. "Come—we must investigate! Something has happened to Madge!"

Together they passed out into the passage leading to the Black Hole. Not ten steps had they taken when they were greeted by the crack of a revolver, followed by a slight fall.

"There's bad work, there!" gritted Duke Harpy, drawing his weapons. "Quick, Ben—we may be in time to take a hand!"

But, prompt as were the two, they were outstripped by Sol Moses and Injun Dick, the outlaws who, with Arkansaw Jim, had captured the Red-Hand Sport.

Moses had caught up a lantern near the main entrance of the cavern, and as he stepped into the Black Hole its rays revealed a chilling sight.

Madge Harpy was dead—stabbed to death by her hot-blooded lover, Jose Morales!

The Mexican lay upon the rough stones beside her, dying.

His black eyes opened drearily as the light flashed across his face, and with a grim smile he muttered:

"It's all a mistake, pard! I was tricked by Arkansaw—curse him! He sent me here to kill our queen's Yankee lover; my knife found her instead!"

And that was all the moribund could be induced to say, save that, wild with grief, he had slain himself.

"Poor Madge! There is a mystery about her fate for which I can find no solution," said Old Duke Harpy, with a sigh, as he drained a glass of raw whisky. "I feel, Ben, that in longer remaining here we are courting a like fate."

"I agree with you, pap," was the hurried response. "I can see with half an eye that these Goldites have no room for us, now that Madge is gone."

Duke Harpy's face visibly lengthened as he scanned his comfortable surroundings.

"We are nicely fixed, and a lengthy stay would have suited me," he remarked, helping himself to another liberal potion. "But we must go, Ben!"

"And, according to my ideas, we can't go too soon, pap."

"No—we shall not delay. We can do nothing for our dead. She was the Queen of the Goldites, and out of the respect they had for her, they will give her decent burial."

"And our treasure, pap—shall we leave it?" asked Ben, an avaricious gleam coming into his eyes, his voice sinking to a whisper.

The old outlaw shook his head in a very decided manner.

"We cannot!" he avowed. "Fortunately, we were made acquainted with the location of the treasure-chamber and the secret of its entrance by our poor girl, and we must take that which is our own."

"And all else that we can carry away," suggested Ben, in the same cautious tone.

"Exactly. We are as much entitled to it all as these knavish Goldites. There is no such thing as 'honor' among thieves. The shrewdest or the strongest rascal takes the pot."

For a full minute father and son stared at each other across the flat top of the huge stone at which they were seated.

"Let's go and get the animals out of the corral," said Ben. "Now is our time, for in their excitement the Goldites will not be as watchful as usual to-night."

"You attend to that matter—I will begin getting the treasure-sacks out of the cave," Old Duke Harpy returned. "I have heard our red friends say that you are an adroit hand at abstracting horseflesh."

"An inherited accomplishment!" declared Ben, with a grimace half-smile, half-sneer. "But we'll say no more of it. Smuggle the bags out the narrow entrance just north of the corral."

Without further ado, the two rascals separated.

In due time, Old Duke made his way into that isolated portion of the cavern in which was stored the ill-gotten wealth of the Goldites.

Thanks to the information derived of Madge, he experienced but little difficulty, although at times the way was so rough as to retard his progress.

Before leaving his quarters, he had provided himself with matches. He dared not risk a lantern.

After passing through the tortuous passage leading into the cavity, he stepped aside and for a moment listened intently.

Everything was quiet in that part of the vast cavern. Not a sound indicated that he had been followed.

With a chuckle of satisfaction, Duke Harpy again moved forward—this time but a few paces.

He then ignited a match and peered around.

A strange scene it was the flickering light revealed.

At his feet were the eight bags of treasure he had stolen from the renegade Apaches.

Just beyond them, packed in stout canvas sacks, the gains of the Goldites.

His eyes sparkled greedily—his breath came in gasps, short and hard.

"It's a king's ransom!" he exclaimed, with a hollow, mirthless laugh. "It's a king's ransom, and this is the crowning stroke of my life."

A quick step rung out in the passage behind him, and startled beyond measure, he wheeled, dashing the match aside.

Then came a blinding flash, lighting up the cavity and the passage—revealing the horrified, face of Ben Harpy—a dull, heavy roar, a shock as of an earthquake, and down upon the doomed miscreants crashed hundreds of tons of earth and rock!

The half-burned lucifer had ignited the powder magazine!

CHAPTER XXXV.

DAVE DANTON TELLS WHAT HE KNOWS.

VERY much crestfallen, indeed, were the three prairie pards, Jenkins, Keith and Yuba at their discomfiture at the hands of the daring pretender, Rube Harpy, and shot after shot rung out from their revolvers as the maddened trio got upon their feet and darted away in pursuit.

Out of the stockade dashed Harpy, unscathed by the storm of bullets. With a bound he was in the saddle; a yell of defiance, and horse and rider disappeared, rushing down the incline and into the pass with the speed of the wind.

"He laughs best who laughs last," quoth the fleeing desperado, hazarding a glance over his shoulder. "That was the closest call of my life!

"Now for a trusty crew from Madge's men, and then—beauty and booty!"

But there was yet an obstacle in his way. The bushes parted with a sharp swish, and into his path leaped a familiar form.

"Hold, Rube Harpy! Another step and you die!" rung out a stern voice, and the brace of leveled revolvers, the red gleam in the eyes of his challenger, told that the words were uttered in deadly earnest.

It was not this, however, that drove the last vestige of color from Rube Harpy's face. It was the knowledge that he had made yet another failure—that the man who had probably wrought the ruin of his scheme now stood before him.

"Out of the way, Dave Danton—you cur!" he shouted, savagely, throwing his horse upon its haunches the better to shield himself. "Stand aside, I say; or, by Heaven! I'll ride you down!"

Danton stood his ground, and by way of response, opened fire, with results disastrous to Harpy; the horse went down, but the agile desperado alighted on his feet.

The shock, however, lost him his weapons.

"Surrender!" yelled Danton.

"Never!" and with a defiant shout Rube Harpy sprung into the bushes, followed by a leaden rain from the weapons of the foe; but, as on the plateau, he seemed to bear a charmed life, and the fusilade was without effect, other than to urge him to almost superhuman effort.

Exasperated by his ill luck, Danton was about to follow, when a ringing shout from the verge of the plateau caused him to halt.

"'Paches! 'Paches, pard! Hyar—quick!" came the cry, and the next instant a burst of war-whoops rung through the pass.

Danton realized that he had not a breath to lose. The yelling red-skins were but a few yards in his rear. He started toward the incline at his best speed, so closely pursued that at each bound he expected to feel the point of a lance in his back; but he reached the foot of the ascent untouched, and at that juncture Long Pete and his pards opened a destructive fire on the reds, under cover of which Danton succeeded in reaching the plateau.

The Apaches at once betook themselves to the undergrowth, and thence, as expeditiously as possible, out of range.

Danton was accorded a friendly greeting by the three bordermen.

"I say, pard, ye made a big fight ov et down thar—better than the hull cadorence ov us up

hyar," exclaimed Big Dale, pressing forward and warmly grasping the hand of the outlaw. "Dern me! ef ther dirty cuss didn't lay ther three ov us out, in one-two-three order, never techin' a we'pin ter do et!"

"He's a hard critter to curry, and we have not seen the last of him, yet," said Danton, breathing hard from his recent exertion. "Nor of the reds, either."

"In kerhoots, think?"

"Yes: as I have told you, Rube Harpy's father and brother are the chiefs known as Death-Eagle and Three Bears, and from the presence of the red renegades below I infer that Rube has fallen in with his precious relatives, and that the red-skins have been summoned to see him through."

At this, the eyes of Long Pete and Dan Yuba met.

"Our friends ain't out ov ther woods yet," muttered Dan Yuba, his face darkening.

"No, thar's room a-plenty fer us ter do a heap ov figgeratin' 'round, ef Danton's 'spicions aire k'rect," the giant remarked.

"But le's mosey—it's healthier inside."

In the mean time, the interior of the stockade presented a busy scene, the chief factors of which were Jackson Mordaunt, Billy Mason and the judge.

Pauline and Nellie had retired to the cabin, in company with Roger Mordaunt, where they were shortly joined by Jackson.

Nellie then related Rube Harpy's daring exploit, while Pauline sat with bowed head, quivering with silent agony.

"The audacity of the scoundrel is unparalleled!" Jackson Mordaunt exclaimed. "There is some dark mystery connected with the affair, and that mystery must be solved."

"You are right, sir; there is a bitter, black mystery enshrouding Richard Royale, and to that mystery I hold the key."

The voice rung out clear and sharp, and the Mordaunts sprung up from the table at which they were sitting, with faces expressive of unbounded astonishment.

A man had entered the room, and was standing with folded arms just within the door, hatless, his head tightly bandaged, his face and hands raw with scratches and bruises, his clothes rent into rags.

"It is Dave Danton—Rugg McBuff!" Pauline ejaculated.

"Yes, Miss Mordaunt, it is I, Dave Danton," was the response, as the fellow turned his glowing eyes from face to face.

"Dastard!" cried Roger, turning white with anger, as he swiftly drew and leveled a revolver. "You have ventured too far this time; you have put your head into a noose!"

Pauline's hand closed around the weapon, pressing it under the raised hammer to prevent its falling.

"Wait, Uncle Roger; you are too hasty," she commanded. "The man has said that he holds the key to this puzzling mystery, and I believe that he speaks the truth. More than that, he risked his life to rescue me from the Apaches last night, and from being our foe he has become our friend. Put down your weapon, I pray you, and hear what he has to say."

"Wal said, Miss Mordaunt!" and Big Dale Keith loomed up in the doorway behind Danton, whereupon there was a second commotion.

"Ye see I ain't so dead es ye thought, from ther word ov Rube Harpy," blandly pursued the burly frontiersman, looking from one to the other; "but I want to say that I w'u'd 'a' bin but fer my new pard hyar," and his hand dropped lightly upon Danton's shoulder.

"An' I want ter tell ye, too, that ye kin hear w'at he has ter say an' believe it, every word, that ye kin take him by ther hand, an' not wish ye hedn't. He's bin a black sheep, I know, but deep in him war ther clean stuff, an' he has showed a white heart, at last."

Roger Mordaunt lowered his weapon.

"I was aware that he possessed something white," he said, sullenly; "but I was under the impression that it was a feather."

Danton winced, but his eyes flashed.

"I did not come to bandy words, Mr. Mordaunt, but to tell what I know and then depart," he returned, his voice cold and hard. "If you choose to hear me, well and good; if not, I can go."

"Stay, sir, and be seated," urged Jackson Mordaunt; "we will hear what you have to say. And you, Dale, take a chair and remain, for I am anxious to hear your story."

Gravely the two men accepted the proffered seats, and Danton began his narrative, keeping back nothing, embellishing naught, making no attempt at palliation.

It was a hard, humiliating confession, but his feelings were effectually masked by the low, dead monotone he assumed.

"In conclusion," he said, "let me tell you that, unless he has been captured and slain by the outlaws or red-skins within a very short time, Richard Royale is alive and somewhere in these hills at this moment, looking for the Hidden-Hope Mine!"

The effect of this announcement may be imagined.

"You speak positively," said Pauline. "Have you seen him?"

"I have, and talked with him."

Big Dale jumped to his feet, at that instant, and brought his ponderous fist down upon the table with a sounding thump.

"I'm a cross-eyed fool, ef I hevn't got the hang ov et at last!" he shouted, excitedly.

"Ther Red-Hand Sport—"

"Is Dick Royale, in deep disguise!" completed Danton.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

RUBE HARPY TRIUMPHANT.

At that juncture Dan Yuba entered the room.

"Boss," he exclaimed, as he sought Jackson Mordaunt's glowing eye, "boss, will ye step outside? Ther Goldites aire afore ther stockade an' they mean biz!"

The miner changed color.

"Rube has encountered Madge, and there is a double motive in this attack," he thought.

Without a word, he followed Yuba from the house.

"Ther trouble with them cusses hes kem, jest es ye 'lowed et w'u'd, boss," returned the squat Hercules, in a husky undertone, as they hurried toward the stockade gate. "Ther skunks marched up ther pass, an' headed straight fer ther gate, Injun file.

"We c'u'dn't hear em, but we did see em, an' warned 'em ter turn back. An' ye kin bet they scooted.

"But they only drew back out ov range, an' from their actions I kinder reckon they aire goin' ter stay right with us."

"Yes, yes; that is their programme," Mordaunt exclaimed. "They have determined to seize the mine, and their first move was an attempt to jump us unawares.

"Failing in that, they will, of course, have to adopt different tactics."

"Starve us out, I reckon, boss?"

"Perhaps; the presence of troops in the hills, however, will be likely to prevent the adoption of that old, old game."

At this juncture they arrived at the gate and Mordaunt took Billy Mason's position at the wicket.

The Goldites had withdrawn to the extreme end of the plateau, where, half-sheltered by the undergrowth, they were holding a council of some sort.

Even as Mordaunt looked, a man stepped out into the moonlight, bearing on the muzzle of his rifle a white flag, and steadily advanced toward the gate.

When he had reached a point one hundred feet from the stockade, the miner hailed him.

"Hold! my man; you are near enough.

"What do you want?"

"A confab with the boss," was the prompt reply, in a thick, husky voice, as the fellow came to a halt.

"Undo the gate, Yuba; I will meet him," said Mordaunt, grimly. "We have as much to learn as have they," and as the gate swung open he slipped out and strode rapidly toward the desperado.

"Now, my man, make known your errand," he exclaimed, sharply, as he confronted the truce-bearer.

The desperado laughed—a mocking, contemptuous sound. The yellow-brown eyes back of the holes in his mask glowed with anything but mirth.

"Don't be so irascible, my dear sir," he uttered, in mock protest. "I adjure you to bear in mind that, although the white rag comes from us, yet you are the one to whom favor is shown."

"We are here in sufficient force to batter down the stockade and rout you out of your stronghold—should it suit our purpose to do it."

"But what is the need! You are shut off from food and water, and with hunger and thirst for allies, we are assured of a bloodless victory."

"In the face of these facts, Jackson Mordaunt, can you not see the advisability of coming to terms?"

"I can't and don't, Rube Harpy," was the curt reply. "Go back to your sister's cut-throats and tell them that they are in the minority—that we are not cut off from supplies, but on the contrary are prepared to withstand a siege of weeks."

"My sister's cut-throats, as you are pleased to term them, will know how much of that story to believe!" sneered Harpy.

"But let me tell you, Jackson Mordaunt, that you are a doomed man. The man who is known to the world as the Branded Viper—known thus through the machinations of yourself and Dick Royale—is on your trail, and his is a vengeance that never sleeps!"

"Bosh! Go back to your ilk. If you mean fight, let it be with lead and steel! Bring on your Viper and his brood! We invite attack!"

"So be it, then," and, turning, Harpy walked slowly toward his confederates.

Mordaunt returned to the stockade.

"W'ot wur et, boss—a bluff?" inquired Yuba, when he had assured himself that the gate was properly secured.

"Just that, and nothing more."

"But where is Jenkins, Yuba?"

"Down ther pass, boss, on a scout; left jest a moment afore them condemned Goldites hove in sight."

"But Pete'll take keer ov hisself, an' give us a lift ef we need et, ye bet!"

"Now, boss, w'ot's ther peppergram?"

"As before. Keep your men in place, and signal me if any move is made by the enemy."

In the mean time affairs had been progressing rather favorably between Dave Danton and Roger Mordaunt.

The old soldier had reached the conclusion that his whilom foe sincerely regretted the villainous work he had done; and Roger Mordaunt was too magnanimous to hold a grudge.

"It's all right, Danton—I'm glad to see you square up!" he finally asseverated, at the same time extending his hand. "It is true you played hard against us, but in return you've done us a big service."

"And while I think of it, I'll retract that vicious little thrust of a bit ago. Dale is right—it is a white heart you have, after all!"

"That is more like you, Roger," exclaimed Jackson, at that moment entering the room.

"Give a man a show" used to be one of your pet ideas.

"And, Danton, I shall see that you are suitably rewarded. To you Royale owes his life, probably, and you were of service to Pauline in the Apache camp."

The gambler drew back in confusion.

"I want no reward," he managed to stammer, "only that you try to forget all—all—that I have done, and that I be allowed a place in your ranks during the struggle with the Goldites."

"Granted—with a reservation, to be made known at some future time," was the smiling response.

Could Jackson Mordaunt have seen the triumphant expression that came over the face of Rube Harpy, as that worthy retraced his steps to the end of the plateau, he would have been fairly startled.

There was a weak point in the apparently impregnable retreat of the Mordaunts, and that weak point the desperado had found.

"Wal, how is it, Cap?" came the gruff voice of one of the Goldites, as Harpy seated himself in their midst. "Did ther cove ketch on?"

"Nary 'ketch'" laughed Rube. "And the plan is feasible, pards."

"Good! we'll jest corral that fifty apiece!" exclaimed another. "Not sich bad pay, Cap, fer ef we ketch ther beggars onawares ther fight will amount ter nuthin'."

"Oh, I'm liberal enough, when it comes to a wrinkle like this and I can find stanch, trustworthy men to do the work," avowed Rube. "In fact, I don't care if I make it seventy-five apiece, if the job is done right up to the handle."

A ripple of satisfaction greeted this announcement.

"Ye kin depend onto us, Cap," asseverated the spokesman of the Goldites. "Eh, pards?"

"Thet's w'ot!" came in a chorus from the bearded roughs.

Rube nodded complacently, saying:

"Well and good, my lads! I guess you'll do to tie to."

"But let's get at the meat in our cocoanut, as the saying goes, and settle all the details of the big scoop."

"As I suspected, the top of the overhanging bluff overhangs the roof of the cabin, and the distance between them is not more than twenty-five feet. By knotting our lariats into a ladder, we can easily descend from the bluff to the cabin roof, and thence to the ground, as soon as the moonlight has given way to the shadow there."

"By that time they will have come to the conclusion that we are in no hurry to attack, and we can count on finding not more than one-half of them awake and on guard."

"But, be they sleeping or waking, if we once get inside the stockade the fight is ours."

"Ye've called ther turn thar, Cap," averred a burly Goldite: "an' I tell ye et will be no resk, sca'cely, ter work ther ladder racket, fer ther galoots won't spicion an attack from thet quarter."

"True; but to work now, lads, and get the ladder in readiness."

Three hours later.

In the deep gloom at the rear of the Mordaunt cabin stood eleven shadowy forms.

The daring scheme of Rube Harpy had been a complete success. The Goldites were within the stockade, and that, too, without raising an alarm.

"Hank Brell!"

"Hyar, Cap!"

"Count off four of the men and go along the stockade from the northwest corner to the gate. Go and bind every sentry you come upon, and see that none of them has a chance to make an outcry."

"And you, Big Jim Boffard, remain here on guard. If anything alarming happens, recall us."

The outlaws responded promptly, and as Brell and his party started on their round, Harpy and the remaining four men moved away toward the southwestern corner of the stockade.

Twenty minutes later they came together at the gate.

"What success, Brell?" Rube demanded.

"Two guards, Cap."

"And there are five. There are more, somewhere, either in the tents or in the house. We'll search the tents first."

"Go back to your starting-point, Brell, and work along the foot of the bluff until we again come together."

The result was four more captives.

"There are three or four in the house," said Harpy, "and we will go there next."

"Go, Brell, with one of your men, and open the gate. Hold yourselves ready to bring up the horses when I signal, for I am anxious to transfer the girls to the cavern."

The desperado then led the way to the cabin. The door was not locked. It opened without a creak.

"Easy, now, lads!" he cautioned, in an undertone. "We'll surprise 'em."

A ray of light escaped from under the first door opening off the hall.

"Our quarry is here," muttered Rube, laying hold of the knob. "Are you ready?"

"Ready!"

The door was flung open with a crash, and into the room sprung Harpy, with drawn revolvers, closely followed by at least half of his outlaw clan.

Jackson Mordaunt leaped to his feet, and his example was quickly followed by Roger, Dave Danton, Pauline and Nellie.

A glance was enough to tell them that they were entrapped.

"By heavens! it is Rube Harpy and his minions!" cried Jackson, turning white with anger.

"You are right, my dear sir; it is Rube Harpy and his friends," the desperado returned, with a profound bow. "You now see your error in having rejected my overtures!

"What! Danton! is it you, old pard? By my life! it pleases me to see you here, for I have something of an extremely interesting nature in store for you!"

And into the tigerish, yellow-brown eyes of the Goldite leader leaped a fierce and deadly flame.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RICHARD ROYALE AT LAST.

"YES, yes! Ladies and gentlemen, you are prisoners at last!" pursued the exultant Harpy, turning to the Mordaunts. "But you shall fare none the worse for it, I assure you, unless you show yourselves stubborn and headstrong."

"I have played a big, a desperate game for booty and beauty, and the fates have dealt me a winning hand."

"Now, hands up, gentlemen, for you must be disarmed and bound."

At that juncture a side-door, communicating with a rear room, was softly opened, to admit three men.

The Mordaunts felt a thrill of hope as their eyes encountered the rugged, weather-beaten faces of the trio.

"Thank Heaven! they are the Three Old Men of the Plains—Long Pete, Big Dale, and Dan Yuba," Pauline murmured.

"Throw down your wepons, Rube Harpy, or, by Christopher! we'll riddle yer gang!" roared Long Pete, his eyes aflame.

"Never! Up and at—"

"Up with a gun—and down you go!" rung a mellow voice from the door behind the outlaws. "You're covered—every man of you!"

A glance attested the truth of the assertion. A file of blue-coats had glided into the room, and in the doorway stood Captain Dale.

Beside him, shorn of all disguise, the Red-Hand Sport.

"Now may God be praised!" fervently ejaculated Jackson Mordaunt, as his eyes encountered the latter's face. "It is our own true-hearted Richard, at last!"

"Amen!" breathed Pauline, the light of an ineffable happiness in her glowing eyes.

The tables had been turned. The Goldites were in a veritable death-trap and they knew it.

Down went their weapons, and up went their hands.

"Sail in and tie us up, Cap!" grimly uttered a grizzled veteran in outlawry, "we's fairly beat, an' we ain't sayin' a word!"

Meanwhile, Rube Harpy had stood as if rooted to the spot. If ever the mortification, the fruitless rage, arising from the complete and sweeping discomfiture of villainy, fully betrayed itself on "the human face divine," it was then and there.

And the words of the old outlaw by no means cooled the dire ire of the moment.

A long blade gleamed in Harpy's hand, and with a fierce imprecation he buried himself toward the center of the room, to plunge the knife into Royale's back.

A dozen strong hands were thrust out to seize

him—a dozen cries rung through the room to warn Royale.

Too late!

The blow fell, and David Danton—"Desperate Dave"—sunk to the floor, lifeless.

At the last moment he had flung himself between Harpy and Royale, and received the blade in his heart.

A shrill yell burst from the throat of the maddened outlaw, as he realized that he had been foiled, and without an instant's hesitation he whirled through the crowd and along the hallway.

"Steady, boyees!" roared Big Dale. "I'll go arter him!" and, forgetful of his wound, the burly frontiersman dashed away in swift pursuit.

On his return he vouchsafed no report, and was asked for none; but the next morning Lieutenant Brainard and his men, returning from their successful expedition against the Goldites at the cave, came upon the body of a man in the little valley—a handsome, well-dressed fellow. His neck had been broken, and in the soft, white flesh was the mark of a giant's hands.

There were eyes red with weeping when David Danton's body was consigned to earth, at sunset of the day following his death.

That another might live, he had yielded up his life. All that man could do, he had done.

The next two or three days were busy ones for our friends; but in the midst of all the hurry and bustle, Dick and Pauline, Captain Harry Dale and Nellie, contrived to find time for many a charming *tete-a-tete*.

It was during one of these occasions that Pauline said:

"There are two things, Dick, that I cannot understand. First, how, if you please, you got it into your head to drift down here, if you lost my letter before you had read it; and, secondly, how you and the captain arrived so opportunely upon the night Harpy had us in his power?"

"There, my dear girl, permit me to enlighten you," returned Royale, with a fond smile.

"Up in Elephant's Lode I secured evidence that Rube and one Oscar Monshaw, a notorious counterfeiter, for whom I had a warrant, were one and the same. It was diamond cut diamond for a few days, and then I followed him and Dave Danton, his partner, from the camp.

"I had assumed a favorite disguise. A number of miles from the camp, I passed them on the trail. They had been unhorsed by road-agents.

"Their actions were so singular that I resolved to keep my eye on them, and after events proved that my suspicions were well-grounded.

"Harpy had gotten hold of your letter to me; while they were reading it, I laid aside every disguise, appeared and demanded the missive. An exchange of shots followed, and I was left for dead by Harpy, although Danton knew to the contrary.

"As soon as I had recovered consciousness, I resumed my disguise, and again pushed along the trail, taking care to avoid the two miscreants.

"And now comes the strange part of the affair. During that ride I ceased to be Dick Royale, and assumed the personality of the character my disguise represented. I was morally certain that I was Dick Brazzleton, and that my friend, Dick Royale, had been murdered. Through it all, I followed Harpy.

"By degrees the hallucination wore away. On the morning I met Big Dale and Danton at the timber where your party had camped, I was fully myself.

"As for our opportune arrival, I fell into the hands of the Goldites, was carried to their cave, bribed Arkansaw Jim, my keeper, to conduct me to the camp of the soldiers, and on the way learned from him that Rube, with a picked party, was on his way here to lay siege to the place.

"I at once persuaded Captain Dale to accompany me here. On our way we fell in with Long Pete, who had been seeking the camp of the troops, and he led us direct to the gate.

"The place was then in the hands of Harpy. While we were devising a way to enter the stockade without alarming the rascals, two of them approached and carelessly opened the gate.

"Now do you understand, Pauline?"

"I do, Dick. But here comes the captain, and with him Nell."

Royale looked over his shoulder at the approaching couple.

"Of course," he laughed.

"Of course—what?"

"They'll make a match of it," he returned, looking tenderly into Pauline's questioning face. "And why shouldn't they? The captain is a splendid fellow."

"And Nell is a darling girl," averred Pauline, with a flush of pleasure. "Anyway, it's a clear case."

"I think so."

And both were right.

THE END.

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